

BAZIN RENÉ

THE CHILDREN
OF ALSACE
(LES OBERLÉS)

René Bazin

The Children of Alsace (Les Oberlés)

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The Children of Alsace (Les Oberlés)

PREFACE

René Bazin is already known to the English public as a writer of exquisite charm and wonderful sensibility. "The Nun," "Redemption," and "This My Son" have revealed his powers to appreciative readers. Bazin is not only an original writer, a charming story-teller, but also a deep thinker, a clear delineator of human character and life, a wonderful landscape-painter, and a bold realist. For it is real life, humble, poignant, palpitating, which we meet in his stories. Life, full of misery and suffering, but also of pity and charity, of self-sacrifice and heroic traits. Bazin is a passionate admirer of Nature, and this admiration and love manifest themselves in his preference for pastoral and rural scenes, and his description of nature and peasant life.

Nature and climate, M. Bazin thinks, exercise a paramount influence upon the soul, and produce deep and permanent impressions.

But in none of his books has he laid so much stress upon this mysterious influence of a country upon the soul of its inhabitants as in "Les Oberlés," which is now placed before English readers under the title of "The Children of Alsace." For it is the country of Alsace, with her woes and sorrows and sufferings, her aspirations and hopes and dreams, which speaks to us through the mouth of Jean Oberlé, the hero, who mysteriously feels the influence of soil upon his soul, and is drawn to France, since Alsace is sighing under the German yoke, and her weeping soul has fled to France there to wait the day of delivery and freedom!

"Les Oberlés," or "The Children of Alsace," possesses all the elements necessary for a real drama, for a great tragedy, namely, the clash of conflicting passions, emotions, and duties. And these conflicting passions arise where one has a right to expect peace and goodwill. The author introduces us to a divided family, and we see the husband rise against his wife, the son against his father, and the brother against the sister. Their different modes of thinking and of feeling, their ambitions and dreams, turn these beings, united by the ties of blood, into enemies. But "Les Oberlés" is not only a family drama, tragic, irreparable, but also depicts the love of the native soil, a love almost physical, in conflict with the love for the Greater Fatherland. It also shows the clash of two civilisations, the Latin and the Teuton, which for forty years have now been waging war on the soil of conquered Alsace.

All these elements make "Les Oberlés" a really tragic novel – a novel full of dramatic incidents, of poignant scenes, but also full of life and love.

A. S. Rappoport.

London,

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CHAPTER I

A FEBRUARY NIGHT IN ALSACE

The moon was rising above the mists of the Rhine. A man who was coming down from the Vosges by a path – a good sportsman and great walker whom nothing escaped – had just caught sight of her through the slope of forest trees. Then he at once stepped into the shadow of the plantations. But this single glance through the opening, at the night growing more and more luminous, was sufficient to make him realise afresh the natural beauty amidst which he lived. The man trembled with delight. The weather was cold and calm – a slight mist rose from the hollows. It did not bring with it yet the scent of jonquils and wild strawberries, but only that other perfume which has no name and no season – the perfume of rosin, of dead leaves, of grass once again grown green, of bark raised on the fresh skin of the trees, and the breath of that everlasting flower which is the forest moss. The traveller breathed in this smell which he loved; he drank it in great draughts, with open mouth, for more than ten strides, and although accustomed to this nocturnal festival of the forest, to these lights of heaven, to these perfumes of earth, to these rustlings of silent life, he said aloud: "Bravo, Winter! Bravo, the Vosges! They have not been able to spoil you." And he put his stick under his arm in order to make still less noise on the sand and pine-needles of the winding path. Then turning his head:

"Carefully, Fidèle, good friend. It is too beautiful."

Three steps behind him trotted a spaniel, long-limbed and lean, with a nose like a greyhound, who seemed quite grey, but who by daylight was a mixture of fire-and-coffee-and-milk colour, with fringes of soft hair marking the outline of his paws, belly, and tail. The beast seemed to understand his master, for he followed him without making any more noise than the moon made in passing over the tops of the pine-trees.

Soon the moonlight pierced through the branches; breaking up the shade or sweeping it away from the open spaces, it spread out across the slopes, enveloped the trunks of trees, or studded them with stars, and quite cold, formless, and blue, created out of these same trees a new forest, which daylight never knew. It was an immense creation – quick and enchanting. It took but ten minutes. Not a tremor foretold it. M. Ulrich Biehler continued his downward path, a prey to growing emotion, stooping sometimes to get a better view of the undergrowth, sometimes bending over the ravines with beating heart, but watching with head erect, like the roebucks when about to leave the valleys for the upland pastures.

This enthusiastic traveller, still young in mind, was, however, not a young man. M. Ulrich Biehler, called M. Ulrich throughout the countryside, was sixty years old, and his hair and beard, almost white, proclaimed his age; but there had been more of the sap of youth in him than in most, just as some possess more bravery or more beauty, and something of this youthfulness he had retained. He lived in the middle of the mountain of Sainte Odile, exactly twelve hundred feet in the air, in a forest-house without any pretension to architecture, and without lands of any sort except the sloping meadow on which it stood, and at the back was a very small orchard, ravaged periodically by hard winters. He had remained faithful to this house, inherited from his father, who had bought it for a holiday residence only, and here he spent the whole year alone, although his friends, like his lands, were plentiful in the plains. He was not shy of men, but he did not like to give up his own way of living, consequently there were some fanciful stories told about him. They said that in 1870 he had gone through the whole campaign wearing a silver helmet, from the crest of which hung, instead of horsehair, the hair of a woman. No one could say if this legend were history. But twenty good people from the plains of Alsace could affirm that there was not among the French Dragoons a more indefatigable horseman, a bolder scout, a more tender companion in misery, or one more forgetful of his own suffering, than M. Ulrich, proprietor of Heidenbruch, in the mountain of Sainte Odile.

He had remained French under German rule. That was at once his joy and the cause of the many difficulties which he tried to surmount or to endure as a set-off for the favour they showed him in allowing him to breathe the air of Alsace. He knew how to make himself respected in the rôle of a man vanquished, tolerated, and watched. There must be no concession which would show forgetfulness of the dear French country, but there must be no provocation; he had no taste for useless demonstration. M. Ulrich travelled much in the Vosges, where he possessed forests here and there, which he looked after himself. His woods had the reputation of being among the best managed in Lower Alsace. His house, shut up for thirty years because of mourning, had, however, a reputation for comfort and refinement. The few persons, French or Alsations, who had crossed the threshold spoke of the graciousness of the host and the art with which he made his guests welcome. Above all, the peasants loved him, those who had gone through the war with him, and even their sons, who took off their hats when M. Ulrich appeared at the corner of their vineyard or of their lucerne-field.

They recognised him a long way off because of his slim, tall figure and his habit of wearing only light clothes, which he bought in Paris, and invariably chose in shades of brown, varying from the dark brown of the walnut to the light brown of the oak. His pointed beard, very well kept, added length to a face which had but little colour and few wrinkles; his mouth smiled readily under his moustaches, and his prominent nose, with its fine outline, showed purity of race; his kind, intelligent grey eyes would quickly become haughty and defiant if one spoke of Alsace; and the wide brow, which imparted a touch of dreaminess to this face of a fighting man, seemed larger still because of two bare patches extending into the thick growth of stiff short hairs.

Now, on this particular evening M. Ulrich had returned from visiting the wood-cutting going on in the mountains of the Valley of the Bruche, and his servants were not expecting him to go out again, when after dinner he said to his servant, the old Lisa, who was waiting at table:

"My nephew, Jean, arrives to-night at Alsheim, and no doubt if I waited till to-morrow I should see him here, but I prefer to see him down there, and to-night. So I am starting. Leave the key under the door, and go to bed."

He had immediately whistled for Fidèle, taken his stick and gone down the path, which entered the wood at some fifty paces below Heidenbruch. M. Ulrich was clad, according to his custom, in a loose coat and trousers of dead-leaf colour and a velvet shooting-cap. He walked quickly, and in less than half an hour he found himself at a place where the path joined a wider alley, made for pedestrians and for the pilgrims of Sainte Odile. The place was mentioned in the guide-books, because for a hundred yards one could look down on the course of a swift stream which lower down the plain flowed through the village of Alsheim; and especially because in an opening of the ravine in the angle formed by two slopes of the mountains, one could see, in daylight, a corner of Alsace – villages, fields, meadows – and very far away a vague streak of silver, which was the Rhine, and beyond that the mountains of the Black Forest – blue as flax and rounded as the loops of a garland. In spite of the night, which limited his vision, M. Ulrich, on arriving in the alley, looked in front of him, through force of habit, but saw only a triangle of steel-coloured darkness in the upper part of which real stars shone, and lower down gleamed luminous points the same size as the stars, lightly veiled and surrounded with a halo – the lamps and candles of the village of Alsheim. The traveller thought of his nephew, whom he was presently to embrace, and asked himself: "Whom am I going to find? What has he become after three years' absence, and three years in Germany?"

It was only a momentary pause. M. Ulrich crossed the alley, and wishing to go the shortest way, passed under the branches of a forest of great beech-trees, which sloped steeply down towards a fir plantation, where he could regain the road. Some dead leaves still trembled at the ends of the lower branches, but the greater number had fallen on those of the preceding year. They had not left an inch of the soil uncovered, and as thin as silk themselves, and quite pale, they looked like a pavement of extremely smooth light-coloured flagstones: the trunks, marbled with moss, regular as columns, rose to a great height at the top, very high up, the tips leant towards each other, and their tenuous

branches touched each other, outlined the arch, and let the light pass through. A few bushes broke the harmony of the lines. About a hundred yards lower down, the barrier of green trees seemed to form the solid wall of this ruined cathedral.

Suddenly M. Ulrich heard a slight noise, which another man would probably not have noticed: it was in front of him, among the green firs towards which he was advancing. It was the sound of a stone rolling down the slopes, faster and faster, striking against obstacles and rebounding. The noise grew fainter and fainter and ended with a detonation, sharply distinct, which proved that the stone had reached the pebbly bottom of the hollow and split. The forest had again become silent, when a second stone, much smaller still, to judge by the sound it called forth, also began to roll along in the shadow. At the same time the dog's hair stood up, and he came back growling to his master.

"Be quiet, Fidèle," he said. "They must not see me!"

M. Ulrich thrust himself behind the trunk of a tree, understanding that a living being was coming up across the wood, and guessing who was going to appear. Indeed, making a hole in the black curtain of pine-trees, he now saw the head, the two forelegs, and soon the whole body of a horse. A white, hurried breath escaped from its nostrils and smoked in the darkness. The animal was making immense efforts to climb the steep slope. With straining muscles its forefeet doubled up like hooks, its belly all but on the ground, it advanced by jerks, but almost noiselessly, sinking into the moss and the thick mass of vegetation heaped on the soil, and hardly displacing anything but the leaves, which slipped one over the other with a murmur as of dropping water. It carried a pale-blue horseman bending over the animal's neck and shoulders, and holding his lance almost horizontally, as if an enemy were near. The breath of the man mingled with the breath of the horse in the cold night air. They advanced, showing by their bearing the difficulty of the upward struggle. Soon the traveller distinguished the yellow cord on the rider's tunic, the black boots beneath the dark breeches, the straight sword hanging at the saddle-bow, and he recognised a horseman of the regiment of Rhenish Hussars garrisoned at Strasburg; then nearer still he was able to distinguish on the black-and-white flag of the lance a yellow eagle, indicating a non-commissioned officer; he saw under the flat cap a beardless face, ruddy and perspiring, with red-brown, fierce and restless eyes, a face buffeted by the horse's mane in motion, and frequently turning to the right, and he named under his breath Gottfried Hamm, quartermaster in the Rhenish Hussars, and son of Hamm the police-constable of Obernai. The man passed by, brushing against the tree behind which M. Ulrich was hiding; the shadow of his body and of his horse stretched across the feet of the Alsatian and on to the neighbouring moss: they left in their wake an odour of harness and of perspiration.

At the moment when he passed the tree he turned his head again towards the right. M. Ulrich looked in the same direction, which was where the greatest length of the beech-wood could be seen. Thirty yards farther on he discovered a second horseman coming up the same track, then a third, who had become no more than a grey silhouette between the columns of beech-trees and then, judging by the shadowy movements, farther on still, he divined that there were other soldiers and other horses climbing the mountain. Suddenly there was a flash in the depths of the wood, as if a glowworm were flying by. It was an order. All the men took one step to the right, and, forming in single file, silently, without uttering a word, continued their mysterious manoeuvre. The shadows moved for an instant in the depths of the forest; the murmur of crushed and falling leaves became more and more indistinct, then ceased, and the night seemed once more to be empty of life.

"A formidable enemy," said M. Ulrich half aloud, "who is kept in training day and night! There was certainly an officer down there on the path. It was in his direction they were all looking. He raised his sword, bright in the moonlight, and those nearest saw it. They all turned. How little noise they made! All the same, I could have finished off two of them – if we had been at war."

Then, noticing that his dog was now quietly looking at him with nose in air and tail wagging, he added:

"Yes, yes, they are gone. You don't like them any more than I do."

Before continuing his way, he waited to make sure that the Hussars would not return in his direction. He did not like meeting German soldiers. These encountered hurt the sore and suspicious pride of the conquered man; they hurt him through his fidelity to France – through his love, which always dreaded a new war – a war, the date of which he saw with astonishment recede and recede. He would sometimes go a long way round in order to avoid a troop on the march on the high roads. Why had those Hussars come to disturb his descent to Alsheim? Always these manœuvres, always this thought of the West away down there, to which they clung with such tenacity; always this beast of prey who prowls supple and agile on the summit of the Vosges, and who watches the moment for descending.

M. Ulrich went down the beech-wood slopes, his head bent, his mind full of sad memories, which a word had been sufficient to call up – less than a word even – for alas! mingled with them, and ready to rise again out of the past, was all the youth of the man. He was careful to make no noise, keeping his dog behind him, and not caressing him when the poor beast rubbed his nose against his master's hand as if to say, "What is the matter then? Are they not gone?"

In a quarter of an hour, by the wider road which he re-entered at the end of the beech-wood, M. Ulrich gained the edge of the forest. A cooler, stronger breeze blew through the oak and hazel copses which bordered the plain. He stopped and listened towards the right, saying, with a displeased shrug of the shoulders:

"That is how they will come back! Not a soul will have heard them! For the moment let us forget them and go and say 'How do you do?' to Jean Oberlé."

M. Ulrich went down a last bit of short, steep path. A few more steps and the screens of undergrowth and brushwood which hid the view were passed. He saw the entire sky unveiled, and below him, in front, to the left and to the right, something of a softer, more misty blue, the land of Alsace. The smell of the fields and of plants wet with the dew, rose from the soil like a harvest of the night. The wind wafted it, the cold wind, the familiar passer-by on this plain, the vagabond companion of the Rhine. One could distinguish no detail in the shadow where Alsace slept, except at a distance of a few hundred yards, where lines of roofs clustered about a round grey belfry ending in a steeple. That was the village of Alsheim. M. Ulrich hastened on and soon found the course of the stream again, now more rapid than ever, the bank of which he had skirted in the mountain; walked along by it, and saw stand out, high and massive, in its park of trees despoiled by winter, the first house of Alsheim – the house of the Oberlés.

It was built on the right of the road, from which it was separated, first by a white wall, then by a brook which ran through the domain more than two hundred yards farther, providing the water necessary for the engines, and then flowing, enlarged and cunningly directed, among the trees, to its outlet. M. Ulrich went through the large gate of wrought iron which opened on to the road, and passing by the lodge-keeper's cottage, leaving to the right the timber-yard full of piled-up wood, of cris-crossed planks, of poles, and of sheds, he took the left avenue, which wound between clumps of trees and the lawn, and reached the flight of steps before a two-storied house, with dormer windows, built of the red stone of Saverne and dating from the middle of the century. It was half-past eight. He went eagerly up to the first floor and knocked at the door of a room.

A young voice answered:

"Come in!"

M. Ulrich had not time to take off his shooting-cap. He was seized round the neck, drawn forward, and embraced by his nephew, Jean Oberlé, who said:

"Good evening, Uncle Ulrich! Ah! How glad I am! What a good idea!"

"Come, let go of me! Good evening, my Jean! You have just arrived?"

"I got here at three o'clock this afternoon. I should have come to see you to-morrow, you know!"

"I was certain of it! But I could not wait so long. I simply had to come down and see you. It is three years since I saw you, Jean! Let me look at you!"

"At your leisure," said the young man, laughing. "Have I changed?"

He had just pushed a leathern arm-chair up to his uncle, and sat down facing him, on a sofa covered with a rug and placed against the wall.

Between them there was a table, on which burned a little oil lamp of chased metal. Near by through the window, whose curtains were drawn aside, the park could be seen all motionless and solitary in the moonlight. M. Ulrich scrutinised Jean with a curiosity at once affectionate and proud. He had grown – he was a little taller than his uncle. His solid Alsatian face had taken on a quiet firmness and more pleasing lines. His brown moustache was thicker, his easy gestures were now those of a man who has seen the world. He might have been mistaken for a Southerner because of the Italian paleness of his shaven cheeks, of his eyes encircled with shadow, because of his dark hair which he wore parted at the side, and because of his pale lips opening over fine healthy teeth, which he showed when he spoke or smiled. But several signs marked him a Child of Alsace. The width of his face across the cheek-bones, his eyes green as the forests of the Vosges, and the square chin of the peasants of the valley.

He had inherited some of their characteristics, for his great grandfather had guided the plough. He had their sturdy horseman's body. The uncle also guessed, by the youthfulness of the glance which met his, that Jean Oberlé, the man of twenty-four, whom he was now looking at once more, was not very different morally from him whom he had known formerly.

"No," he said, after a long pause, "you are the same! – only you are a man – I was afraid of greater changes."

"And why?"

"Because, my boy, at your age especially there are certain journeys which are crucial tests. But first, where do you come from, exactly?"

"From Berlin, where I passed my *Referendar* examination."

The uncle laughed a jerky laugh, which he repressed quickly, and which was lost in his grey beard.

"Let us call that the *Licence en droit* examination – if you kindly will."

"Most willingly, uncle."

"Then give me a fuller explanation and one more up-to-date, for you must have had your diploma in your pocket more than a year. What have you done with your time?"

"It's very simple. The year before last I passed my examination, as you know, in Berlin, so finishing my law studies. Last year I worked with a lawyer till August. Then I travelled through Bohemia, Hungary, Croatia, and the Caucasus – with father's permission. I took six months over it. I returned to Berlin to get my student's luggage and to pay some farewell visits – and here I am."

"Well, and your father? In my haste to see you again I have not asked after him. Is he well?"

"He is not here."

"What! Was he obliged to be absent on the very evening of your return?"

Jean answered with a little bitterness:

"He was obliged to be present at a great dinner at the Councillor von Boscher's. He has taken my sister. It is a very grand reception, it seems."

There was a short silence. The two men smiled no longer. They felt between them – quite near – the supreme question, imposing itself upon them after a three minutes' conversation, that exasperating and fatal question which cannot be avoided, which unites and divides, which lurks beneath all social intercourse, honours, mortifications, and institutions, the question which has kept Europe under arms for thirty years.

"I dined alone," said Jean, "that is to say, with my grandfather."

"Not much of a companion, poor man. Is he not always so depressed, and so very infirm?"

"But his mind is very much alive, I assure you!"

There was a second silence, after which M. Ulrich asked, hesitatingly:

"And my sister? Your mother? Is she with them?"

The young man nodded an affirmative.

The elder man's grief was so intense that he turned away his eyes so that Jean might not see all the suffering they expressed. He raised them by chance to a water-colour by that master of decorative art, Spindler, hanging on the wall, and which represented three beautiful Alsatian girls amusing themselves swinging. Quickly he looked his nephew straight in the face, and, his voice broken with emotion, said:

"And you? You, too, could have dined with the Councillor von Boscher, considering how intimate you are with these Germans. Did you not wish to follow your parents?"

"No."

The word was said decidedly, simply. But M. Ulrich had not got the information he sought. Yes, Jean Oberlé had certainly become a man. He refused to blame his family, to voice any opinion which would be an accusation of the others. His uncle continued with the same ironical accent:

"Nevertheless, my nephew, all the winter through your Berlin successes were dinned into my ears. They did not spare me. I knew you were dancing with our fair enemies. I knew their names."

"Oh, I beg you," said Jean seriously, "do not let us joke about these questions – like people who dare not face them and give their opinion. I have had a different education from yours, it is true, uncle – a German education. But that does not diminish my love for this country; on the contrary..."

M. Ulrich stretched his hand across the table and pressed that of Jean.

"So much the better," he said.

"Did you doubt it?"

"I did not doubt it, my child – I did not know. I see so many things that pain me – and so many convictions surrendered."

"The proof that I love our Alsace is shown by my intention to live in Alsheim."

"What!" said M. Ulrich, stupefied. "You give up the idea of entering the German Administration – as your father desires you should do? It is grave – a serious thing, my friend, to rob him of his ambition. You were the subject of the future. Does he know?"

"He suspects; but we have not yet had any explanations on the matter. I have not had time since my return."

"And what will you do?"

The youthful smile reappeared on the lips of Jean Oberlé.

"I shall cut wood, as he does, as my grandfather Phillipe does; I shall settle among you here. When I travelled in Germany and in Austria, after my examination, it was chiefly that I might study the forests, the saw-mills, and the factories like our own. You are weeping?"

"Not quite."

M. Ulrich was not weeping, but he was obliged to dry his wet eyelids with the tip of his finger.

"It would be for joy, in any case, my dear boy. Oh, for a true and great joy. To see you faithful to what I love best in the world. To keep you with us – to see you determined not to accept appointments and honours from those who have violated your country... Yes, it was the dream I dared no longer dream... Only, quite frankly, I cannot understand it. I am surprised. Why are you not like your father, or like Lucienne, who have so openly rallied to the enemy? You studied law in Munich, in Bonn, in Heidelberg, in Berlin; you have just passed four years in Germany, without speaking of your college years. How did you avoid becoming German?"

"I am less so than you."

"That is hardly possible."

"Less than you, because I know them better. I have judged them by comparison. Well, they are our inferiors."

"Well, I *am* pleased. We hear nothing but the opposite of this. In France, above all, the praise of the conquerors of 1870 continues without intermission."

The young man, touched by M. Ulrich's emotion, leaned no longer on the sofa, but bending forwards, his face lit up by the lamp, which made his green eyes appear more brilliant, said:

"Do not mistake me, Uncle Ulrich. I do not hate the Germans, and in that I differ from you. I even admire them, for in some things they are admirable. Among them I have friends I esteem greatly. I shall have others. I belong to a generation which has not seen what you have seen, and which has lived differently – I have not been conquered!"

"Happily, not!"

"Only the more I know them, the more I feel myself different from them; I feel I am of another race, with another category of ideals into which they do not enter, which I find superior, and which, without knowing why, I call 'France.'"

"Bravo, Jean, bravo!"

The old dragoon officer bent forward – he also was quite pale – and the two men were only separated by the width of the table.

"What I call France, uncle, what I have in my heart, like a dream, is a country where there is a greater facility for thought."

"Yes – "

"For speech – "

"That's it!"

"For laughter."

"How right you are!"

"Where souls have infinite shades of colour! A country that has the charm of a woman one loves, as it were a still more beautiful Alsace."

Both had risen, and M. Ulrich drew his nephew towards him, and pressed that fervent head against his breast.

"Frenchman!" said he, "Frenchman to the marrow of your bones, and in every drop of blood in your veins! My poor boy!"

The young man continued, his head still resting on the older man's shoulder:

"That is why I cannot live over yonder – across the Rhine – and why I shall live here!"

"Well might I say 'poor boy'!" answered M. Ulrich. "All is changed – alas! Even here in your home. You will suffer, Jean, with a nature like yours. I understand everything now – everything."

Then letting his nephew go:

"How glad I am I came to-night. Sit down there quite close to me. We have so much to say to each other – Jean, my Jean!"

They sat down side by side, happy, on the sofa. M. Ulrich stroked his pointed beard into its habitual well-groomed neatness. He recovered from his emotion, and said:

"Do you know that by speaking of France as we have spoken this evening, we have committed misdemeanours such as I delight in? It is not allowed. If we had been out of doors and Hamm had heard us, we should have been speedily dealt with – there would have been an official report!"

"I met him this afternoon."

"And I saw the son pass by in the depths of the wood just now. He is a non-commissioned officer in the Rhenish Hussars – the regiment which will soon be yours. Is that the carriage I hear?"

"No."

"Listen, then!"

They listened, gazing out of the window at the park, which was lit up by the full high moon; at the lawn in the shape of a lyre with its two white avenues, at the clumps of trees, and farther on the tile roofs of the saw-mill. Not a sound could be heard save the fall of the brook at the factory sluice, a monotonous sound which seemed now near, now far, according to the direction and strength of the freshening wind which was now blowing from the north-east, "from the Cathedral platform," as Uncle Ulrich said, thinking of Strasburg.

"No; what you hear," said Jean Oberlé, after listening for a while, "is the noise of the sluice. Father told the coachman to go to Molsheim to wait for the eleven-thirty train. We have time to chat."

They had time, and they made good use of it. They began to speak softly, without haste or difficulty, like those who have recognised that they agree on essentials and who can now safely open up all other questions, even the smallest. They spoke of the year's voluntary service Jean had been allowed to postpone until he was twenty-four, and of that new life he was going to begin at Strasburg – of the ease with which he could come nearly every Sunday to Alsheim. Then, this dear name having been repeated, uncle and nephew took pleasure in their recollections of the country, first of Alsheim, then of Sainte Odile, of the forest-dwelling of Heidenbruch, of Obernai, of Saverne, where the uncle had forests, of Guebwiller, where he had relations. It was Alsace they evoked. They thoroughly understood one another. They smoked, their legs crossed, seated one in each corner of the sofa, letting their words flow freely, and laughing often. Their conversation was so prolonged that the Black Forest cuckoo clock hanging over the door struck midnight.

"Do you suppose we have disturbed your grandfather?" asked M. Ulrich, getting up, and pointing with his hand to the wall which separated the young man's room from that of the sick man.

"No," said Jean; "he hardly sleeps at all now – I am sure it has pleased him to hear me laugh. As my family left me at five o'clock I spent a good deal of my time with him, and I watched him closely. He hears and understands everything. He recognised your voice, I am sure, and perhaps he has caught a word here and there."

"That will have pleased him, my boy. He belongs to the very old Alsace, that country which seems almost fabulous to you, and to which I also belong, although I am much younger than M. Oberlé. It was wholly French, that Alsace, and not a man of that time has changed. Look at your grandfather – look at old Bastian. We are the generation who suffered. We represent grief – we others. Your father embodies resignation."

"And I?"

Uncle Ulrich looked at the young man, with his far-seeing eyes, and said:

"You – oh, you are Romance."

They would have smiled, both of them, but they could not, as if that word had been too perfectly accurate, which is not always the case with human judgments – as if they felt that Fate was there in this room, invisible, who repeated to them at the bottom of their hearts at the same time: "Yes, it is true – "this one is Romance." The grief which was oppressing them was only to be explained by the imminence of life's mystery. It faded away. M. Ulrich reached out his hand to his nephew, more gravely than he would have done if that word had not escaped him, which he did not regret, but which remained present with him.

"Good-bye, dear Jean. I would rather not wait for my brother-in-law. I do not know what attitude I should take up towards him. All you have told me would embarrass me. You will wish him good night for me. I will go home through the woods by moonlight. What a pity I have not my gun with me and the good luck to come across a brace of grouse in the fir wood."

To reach the staircase he took some careful steps on the carpet in the passage.

"Uncle," said Jean, in a low tone, "if you would go to my grandfather I am sure he would be pleased – I am sure he is not sleeping."

Uncle Ulrich, who was walking in front, stopped and retraced his steps. Jean turned the handle of the door near which he was, and going first into the room, said, in a lowered voice:

"Grandfather, I bring you a visitor – Uncle Ulrich – who wishes to see you."

They were in the semi-darkness of a large room, the curtains of which had been drawn, and a nightlight, in transparent china, placed at the end of the room on the left between the closed window and a bed which occupied the corner, was the sole light. On the table beside the bed, in the little luminous halo which surrounded the nightlight, was a small crucifix of copper, and a gold watch, the only shining objects in the room. In the bed an old man was sitting rather than lying, his shoulders

covered with a grey wool crossover, his back and head supported by pillows, his hands hidden under the sheets, which still kept the folds of the linen press. A tapestry riband, serving as bell-cord and finishing in a fringe, reached to the middle of the bed. The man who was sleeping or waking there was impotent. Life with him was withdrawing more and more within. He walked and moved with difficulty. He no longer spoke. Under his thick, pale cheeks his mouth moved only to eat and to say three words – three cries – always the same: "Hunger, Thirst. Go away!" A sort of senile laziness allowed his jaw to hang, the jaw that had commanded many men. M. Ulrich and Jean went to the middle of the room without his giving the least sign that he was conscious of their presence. This poor human ruin was, however, the same man who had founded the factory at Alsheim, who had raised himself from the condition of a little country proprietor, who had been elected *protesting* deputy, who had been seen and heard in the Reichstag, claiming the unrecognised rights of Alsace and demanding justice of Prince Bismarck. Intelligence was watching, imprisoned, like the flame which lit up the room that night; but it expressed itself no longer. In this uninterrupted dream what men and things must pass before the mental vision of him who knew the whole of Alsace, who had gone through it in every direction, who had drunk of its white wines at all the tables of the rich and the poor; traveller, merchant, forester, and patriot! And it was he – this wrinkled bald head, this lowering face, these heavy eyelids, between which a slow, sad eye slipped to and fro like a billiard ball in the immovable slit of a bell. However, the two visitors had the impression that his gaze rested on them with an unusual pleasure.

They kept silence so as to let the old man savour the sweetness of a thought they would never, never know. Then Uncle Ulrich went near the bed, and, placing his hand upon the arm of Philippe Oberlé, bending down slightly to be nearer his ear and to more easily meet his eyes, which were raised with difficulty:

"We have talked a good deal, M. Oberlé, your grandson and myself. He is a good fellow – your Jean!"

A movement of the whole upper part of the body slowly changed the position of the head of the old man, who was trying to see his grandson.

"A good fellow," continued the forester, "whose stay in Berlin has not spoiled him. He has remained worthy of you – an Alsatian, a patriot. He does you honour."

Though there was only the tiny floating light in the room, Uncle Ulrich and Jean thought they perceived a smile on the face of the old man, the answer from a soul still young.

They quietly withdrew, saying:

"Good night, M. Oberlé. Good night, grandfather."

The flame of the nightlight flickered, displacing lights and shadows; the door was shut, and the interrupted dream continued in the room, where hardly anything had entered since sunset save the hours struck in the belfry of the church of Alsheim. M. Ulrich and his nephew parted at the foot of the staircase. The night was cold, the grass all white with frost.

"Good time for walking!" said M. Ulrich; "I shall expect you at Heidenbruch."

He whistled for his dog, and stroking its red-brown head, said:

"Take me home, for I am going to dream all the time of what that boy told me!"

Scarcely had he gone some few hundreds of yards – the sound of his footstep could still be heard on the road going up towards the Wood of Urlosen – when in the calm of the night Jean caught the sound of the trotting horses coming from the Obernai district. The noise of their shoes striking the metalled road sounded like flails on a threshing-floor; it was a rural sound, and not disturbing; it broke no rest. Fidèle, who was barking furiously towards the edge of the forest, must have had other reasons to show her teeth and give tongue. Jean listened to the carriage coming nearer. Soon the noise grew less and less, then became deadened, and he knew that the carriage had passed between the walls of the village, or at least had entered the circle of orchards which made Alsheim in the summer a nest of apple-trees, cherries, and walnuts. Then it swelled and sounded clear like a train coming

out of a tunnel. The gravel scrunched at the end of the avenue. Two lamps turned and passed rapidly across the park; the grass, the shrubs, the lower trunks of trees, arose abruptly out of the darkness and as abruptly sank back into it again, and the brougham stopped before the house. Jean, who had remained at the top of the staircase, went down and opened the door. A young girl got out at once; her face was rosy, and she was wrapped all in white – white mantilla, coat of white wool, and white shoes. In passing, almost in the air, she bent to the right, just touched Jean's forehead with a kiss, and half opened two lips heavy with sleep.

"Good night, little brother."

And picking up her skirt with a loose grasp, with wavering movements, her head already on the pillow as it were, she went up the stairs and disappeared into the vestibule.

"Good evening, my son," said the authoritative voice of a man. "You have waited for us; you were wrong. Come quickly, Monica, the horses are very hot. Auguste, you will give them twelve litres to-morrow. You would have done better to have gone with us, Jean. It was all very nice. M. von Boscher asked twice about you."

The person who spoke thus, now to one and now to the other, had had time to get out of the carriage, to shake hands with Jean, to turn towards Madame Oberlé, still seated in the back of the carriage, to go half-way up the flight of steps, to inspect with the eye of a connoisseur the two black horses, whose wet backs looked as if they had been rubbed with soap. His grey whiskers framed a full and solid face; his overcoat was unbuttoned, showing the open waistcoat and the shirt, where three Rhine stones shone; his oratorical hand only appeared a moment. After having given his opinion and his orders, Joseph Oberlé – vigilant master who forgot nothing – quickly raised his double chin and fixed his eyes on the end of the enclosure, where the pyramids of felled trees were resting, to see if there were any signs of fire visible, or if any shadow prowled round the saw-mill; then, nimbly mounting the second flight of steps two at a time, he entered the house. His son had answered nothing. He was helping Madame Oberlé out of the carriage, taking from her her gloves and fan, and asking:

"You are not so very tired, are you, mother darling?"

Her dear eyes smiled, her long mouth said:

"Not too tired; but it is not for me, now, my dear. You have an old mother!"

She leaned on the arm of her son – from a mother's pride more than from necessity. There was infinite sadness in her smile, and she seemed to ask Jean, at whom she looked while going up the steps, "You forgive me for having gone there? I have suffered."

She was wearing a black satin dress. She had diamonds in her hair, still black, and a collar of blue fox on her shoulders. Jean thought she looked like an unhappy queen, and he admired the elegance of her head, of her walk, and her fine carriage. She was of an old Alsatian family, and he felt himself the son of this woman with a pride he showed only to her.

He accompanied her, giving her his arm all the time so as to have the joy of being nearer to her, and to stop her on nearly every step of the staircase.

"Mamma, I have spent an excellent evening. It would have been delicious if only you had been there! Imagine, Uncle Ulrich came at half-past eight, and he only set out for home at midnight, just now."

Madame Oberlé smiled a melancholy smile and said:

"He never stops as long as that for us. He keeps away."

"You mean to say that he keeps away! I will bring him back to you."

She stopped in her turn, looked at this son, whom she had not seen since the afternoon, and smiled more gaily.

"You love my brother?"

"Better than I used to. I seem to have just discovered him."

"You were too young before."

"And how we have talked! We agree on all points."

The gentle maternal eyes sought those of her child in the twilight of the staircase.

"Oh, all?" she asked.

"Yes, mamma, on all!"

They had arrived at the top of the stairs. She placed her gloved finger on her mouth. She withdrew her arm which she had placed in that of her son. She was at the door of her room, facing M. Philippe Oberlé's room. Jean kissed her, withdrew a little, returned to her, and pressed her once again to his heart silently.

Then he took a few steps down the passage, looked again at this woman dressed in black, and whom mourning suited so well – so simple with her drooping white hands and her erect head, so firm of feature, so gentle in expression.

He murmured gaily:

"Saint Monica Oberlé, pray for us!"

She did not seem to hear him, but she remained, her hand on the door-handle without entering, as long as Jean could see her, Jean, who was going backwards step by step, farther away, into the shadows of the passage.

He entered his room, his heart joyful, his mind full of thoughts, all those thoughts of the past evening coming back now with swift flight in the solitude of the present. Feeling that he would not sleep at once, he opened the window. The cold air blew steadily from the north-east. The mist had fled. From his room Jean could see, beyond the wide strip of cultivated hilly ground, the forests where Shadow all night long wound and unwound her folds, away to the heights crowned here and there by a spiked cluster of ancient woods, which broke the line of hills and wreathed itself about in stars. He tried to find the house of M. Ulrich. And in thought he saw again him who ought to be arriving home, when voices began to sing on the edge of the forest. A shiver of pleasure seized the nerves of the young man, who was a passionate musician. The voices were beautiful, young, and in tune. There were more than twenty of them certainly, perhaps thirty or fifty. He missed the words because of the distance. It was like the sound of an organ in the night. They flung out to the wind of Alsace a song of a spirited rhythm. Then three distinct words reached Jean's ears. He shrugged his shoulders, irritated with himself for not having understood at once. It was a chorus of German soldiers coming back from the manœuvre of those Rhenish Hussars M. Ulrich had met coming down the mountain. According to custom, they sang to keep themselves awake, and because there was in their songs the power of the word Fatherland. The horses' hoofs accompanied the melody like muffled cymbals. The words escaped and vibrated:

Stimmt an mit hellem hohen Klang,
Stimmt an das Lied der Lieder.
Des Vaterlandes Hochgesang,
Das Waldthal hall es wieder."

Jean would have been glad to stop the song. How many times, however, and in all the German Provinces, had he not heard the soldiers sing? Why should he feel sad at the song of these men? Why did the words enter into his soul so painfully, although he knew them and could repeat them from memory? When some two hundred yards from the village they became silent. Only the clatter of hoofs continued drawing nearer to Alsheim and echoing above it. Jean leaned forward to see the horsemen pass in the little market town. He could see them through a large opening in the wall surrounding the park, secured by an iron gate just in front of the house – a moving mass in a brown dust that the wind blew back, leaning like barley beards in the ear. The men were not to be distinguished from each other, nor the horses. Jean thought, with a secret and increasing pain, "How many there are!"

At Berlin, at Munich, at Heidelberg, they only aroused an idea of strength without any immediate aim or object. The enemy had not been specially singled out; it was everything opposed

to the greatness of the German Empire. Jean Oberlé had more than once admired the march of regiments and the wonderful power of the man who commanded so many men. But here on the frontier, on the ground still bloody with the last war, there were memories which showed only too well who was aimed at and threatened. The sight – the noise – of the soldiers made him dream of butcheries, of death, and of the fearful mourning which remains. They were passing between the houses. The noise of the squadrons, of men and beasts shook the windows. The little town seemed asleep. Neither the soldiers nor their leaders noticed anything; but in many of the houses a mother woke and sat up in her bed, shivering; a man stretched out his fist and cursed these conquerors of past days. God alone knew the drama. They passed by. When the last squadron had finished throwing shadows across the road, between the two pillars of the gate, Jean thought he saw, in the dust that was settling, a horseman facing the house. Was the horse refusing to advance? No; he was at rest. The horseman must be an officer – something golden placed in several rows across his breast sparkled. He did not move, firm in his saddle, young certainly, he gazed in front of him. This lasted scarcely a minute. Then he lowered the sabre he held in his hand, and having saluted, put spurs to his horse, which rushed away. The scene had been so quick that Jean might have thought it an illusion, if the gallop of the beast had not sounded in the village street.

"Some Teutonic joke," he thought – "a way this officer has found of saying that the house pleases him! Thanks!"

The regiment had already left the village and ridden away to the wide plain. The houses had gone to sleep once more. The wind blew towards the green Vosges. In the opposite quarter, far away now, like a religious hymn, rose again the song of the German soldiers, who were celebrating the German Fatherland whilst marching towards Strasburg.

CHAPTER II

THE EXAMINATION

On the following day the morning was far advanced when Jean left his room and appeared on the flight of steps built of the red stone of Saverne like the house, which opened on to the park in two flights of long steps. He was dressed in shooting clothes – of which he was fond – gaiters of black leather, breeches and coat of blue wool, with a hat of soft felt, in the ribbon of which he stuck a grouse feather. From the steps he asked:

"Where is my father?"

The man whom he addressed, the gardener, busy raking the avenue, answered:

"Monsieur is in the office at the saw-mill."

The first thing that Jean Oberlé saw on raising his eyes was the Vosges mountains, clothed with forests of pines, with trails of snow in the hollows, and with low, rapid clouds hiding the peaks. He trembled with joy. Then having gazed at the lowest mountain slopes, at the vineyards, and then the meadows, as if to impress on his memory all the details of these places found again after a long absence, and above all with the added satisfaction of remaining among them, his eyes fastened on the red roofs of the saw-mill, which made a barrier at the end of the Oberlé property, on the chimneys, on the high building where the turbines were, to the right on the course of the mountain stream of Alsheim, and nearer on the timber-yard whence the factory got its supplies, on the heaps of wood from trees of all sorts – beams, planks, which rose in pyramids and enormous cubes, beyond the winding alleys and the clumps of trees, some two hundred yards from the house. Jets of white steam in many places escaped from the roof of the saw-mill, and rested on the north wind like the clouds up above.

The young man went to the left, crossed the park, formerly planted and designed by M. Philippe Oberlé, and which was now beginning to be a freer and more harmonious corner of nature, and turning towards the piles of oak trunks, elms, and pines, went to knock at the door of the long building.

He entered the glass pavilion which served the master for a workroom. He was engaged in reading the day's letters. Seeing his son appear, he put the papers on the table, made a sign with his hand which meant "I expected your visit – sit down" – and moving his arm-chair, he said:

"Well, my boy! What have you to say to me?"

M. Joseph Oberlé was a ruddy man, quick and authoritative. Because of his shaven lips, his short whiskers, the correctness of his clothes, the easiness of his words and manners, he had sometimes been taken for an old French magistrate. The mistake did not arise with those who thought thus. It had been made by circumstances which had taken M. Joseph Oberlé in spite of himself from the way wherein he had intended to go, and which should have led him to some public office in the magistrature or the administration. The father, the founder of the dynasty, Philippe Oberlé, son of a race of peasant proprietors, had founded at Alsheim in 1850 this mechanical saw-mill, which had rapidly prospered. He had become in a few years rich and powerful, very much beloved, because he neglected no means to that end; increasingly influential, but without at all foreseeing the events which would one day induce him to put his influence at the service of Alsace.

The son of this industrial workman could hardly escape the ambition of being a public functionary. That is what happened – his education had prepared him for it. Taken early from Alsace, pupil for eight years at the Lycée Louis le Grand, then law student, he was at twenty-two years old attached to the office of the Prefect of Charente, when the war broke out. Retained for some months by his chief, who thought it would please his friend the great manufacturer of Alsace if he sheltered the young man behind the walls of the prefecture of Angoulême; then on his demand incorporated tardily in the Army of the Loire, Joseph Oberlé marched much, retired much, suffered much from cold, and fought well on rare occasions. When the war was finished he had to make his choice.

If he had consulted his personal preferences only, he would have remained French, and he would have continued to follow an administrative career, having a taste for authority and few personal opinions on the quality of an order to be transmitted. But his father recalled him to Alsace. He implored him not to leave the work begun and prospering. He said: "My industry is become German by conquest; I cannot leave the instrument of my fortune and your future to perish. I detest the Prussians, but I take the only means which I have of continuing my life usefully. I was a Frenchman, I become an Alsatian. Do the same. I hope it will not be for long."

Joseph Oberlé had obeyed with real repugnance – repugnance at submitting to the law of the conqueror, repugnance at living in the village of Alsheim, lost at the foot of the Vosges. He had even committed at this time imprudences of speech and attitude which he regretted now. For the conquest had lasted; the fortunes of Germany were strengthened, and the young man, associated with his father and become the master of a factory, had felt the meshes of an administration similar to the French administration, but more harassing, stricter, and better obeyed, knotting itself and drawing closer round him. He saw that on every occasion, without any exception, the German authorities would put him in the wrong; the police, the magistrates, the functionaries established for public services which he used daily, the commission of public roads, the railways, the water supply, the forests, the customs. The malevolence which he met with on all sides and in all departments of German administration, although he had become a German subject, was aggravated and had become quite a danger to the prosperity of the house of Alsheim, when, in 1874, M. Philippe Oberlé, giving to his son the direction of the saw-mill, had yielded to the insistences of that poor forsaken country, which wanted to make of him, and did make him, the representative of her interests at the Reichstag, and one of the protesting deputies of Alsace.

This experience, the weariness of waiting, the removal of M. Philippe Oberlé, who spent a part of the year at Berlin, modified sensibly the attitude of the young head of the industrial enterprise. His first fervour, and that of others, grew less. He saw the anti-German manifestations of Alsatian peasants becoming rarer and more prudent. He hardly did any business with France; he no longer received visits from French people, even those made from interested and commercial motives. France, so near by distance, became like a walled-in country, shut up, and whence nothing more came to Alsace, neither travellers nor merchandise. The newspapers he received left him in no doubt as to the slow abandonment which certain French politicians counselled under the name of wisdom and concentration.

In ten years M. Joseph Oberlé had used up, till he could no longer find a trace in himself, all that his temperament allowed him of resistance to oppose to an established power. He was rallied. His marriage with Monica Biehler, desired and arranged by the old and ardent patriot who voted in the Reichstag against Prince Bismarck, had had no influence on his new ideas and attitude, at first secret, soon suspected, then known, then affirmed, then scandalously published by M. Joseph Oberlé. He gave pledges to the Germans, then hostages. He overstepped the boundary. He went farther than obedience. The foremen of the factory, old soldiers of France, admirers of M. Philippe Oberlé, companions of his struggle against the Germanisation of Alsace, bore with difficulty the attitude of the new master and blamed him. One of them in a moment of impatience had said to him one day, "Do you think we are so particularly proud to work for a renegade like you?" He had been discharged. His comrades immediately had taken his part, interceded, talked, and threatened a strike. "Well, do it," the master had said; "I shall be delighted. You are all quarrelsome fellows; I shall replace you by Germans!" They did not believe in the threat, but when a fresh crisis arose M. Joseph Oberlé carried it into execution a little later, that he might not be accused of weakness, which he feared more than injustice, and because he thought he could gain some advantage by replacing the Alsations, continual grumblers, by workmen from Baden and Wurtemberg who were better disciplined and more easily managed. A third of the employés at the saw-mill had thus been replaced. A little German colony had been established to the north of the village, in the houses built by the master, and the Alsations who

remained had to bend before the argument of daily bread. That happened in 1882. Some years later, they learned that M. Oberlé had sent his son Jean to be educated in Bavaria at the Munich gymnasium. In the same way he sent off his daughter Lucienne, placing her in the charge of the mistress of the most German school in Baden-Baden, the Mündner boarding-school. This last measure roused public opinion most of all. They were furious at this repudiation of Alsatian education and influence. They pitied Madame Oberlé thus separated from her son and deprived, as if she had been unworthy, of the right of bringing up her own daughter. To all those who blamed him the father replied, "It is for their good. I have spoiled my life; I do not wish them to spoil theirs. They will choose their road later when they have been able to make comparisons. But I will not have them from their very youth catalogued, pointed at, and inscribed on the official list as Alsatian pariahs."

Sometimes he added: "You do not understand, then, all the sacrifice that I am making! I am sparing my children these sacrifices; I am devoting myself to them. But that does not mean that I am not suffering."

He did suffer in fact, and so much the more that the confidence of the German administration was hard to gain. The reward of so much effort did not seem enviable. True, those in office began to flatter, to draw nearer, to seek out M. Joseph Oberlé, a precious conquest, of which many district directors had boasted in high places. But they watched him, whilst loading him with invitations and kind attentions. He felt the hesitation, the mistrust, scarcely disguised, sometimes even emphasised by the new masters he wished to please. Was he safe? Had he taken the side of the Annexation without any mental reservation? Did he sufficiently admire the German genius, German civilisation, German commerce, the German future? One had to admire so much and so many things!

The answer, however, became more and more affirmative. There was the acknowledged desire to make his son, Jean, enter the German magistracy, and there was the systematic continuation of this kind of exile imposed on the young man. When his classical studies were finished and his final examination passed with success at the end of the scholastic year, 1895, Jean spent his first year of law studies at the University of Munich; he divided the next year between Bonn and Heidelberg; then took his licentiate's degree at Berlin, where he went through the Referendar Examination. At last, after a fourth year, when as a licentiate in law he entered the office of a lawyer at Berlin, after long travel in foreign countries, the young man came back to his home to rest before joining a regiment.

Truly the plan had been thoroughly carried out. In the first years of his student life, in his holidays even, excepting some days given to his family, his time had been given to travelling. During the last years he had not even appeared in Alsheim.

The end of it was that the administration no longer suspected him. Besides, one of the great obstacles to a public reconciliation between the functionaries of Alsace and M. Joseph Oberlé had disappeared. The old protesting deputy, seized by the illness which became chronic, retired from political life in 1890. From that moment dated, for the son, the smiles, the promises, the favours so long solicited. M. Joseph Oberlé recognised in the development his affairs had taken – in the Rhenish country and even beyond it – in the diminution of the official reports directed against his employés, or against himself in cases of contravention, in the signs of deference which the small officials showed him – formerly the most arrogant of all, in the ease with which he had ruled disputable points, obtained authorisations, altered the rules in divers points – in all these signs, as well as in others, he recognised that the governmental mind, present everywhere, incarnate everywhere in a multitude of men of gold lace – was no longer against him.

More definite advances were made to him. The preceding winter, while Lucienne, who had returned from the Mündner school, pretty, witty, charming, was dancing in the German salons of Strasburg, the father was talking with the representatives of the Empire. One of them, the prefect of Strasburg, Count Kassewitz, acting probably in accordance with superior orders, had let drop that the Government would see, without displeasure, M. Joseph Oberlé present himself as candidate for the

deputyship in one of the districts of Alsace, and that the official support of the administration would be given to the son of the old protesting deputy.

This prospect filled M. Oberlé with joy. It had revived the ambition of this man who found himself up to then repaid but badly for the sacrifices of self-respect, friendships, and memories, which he had had to make. It gave new energies and a definite object to this official temperament, depressed by circumstances. M. Oberlé saw his justification in it, without being able to reveal it. He said to himself that, thanks to his energy, to his contempt for Utopia, to his clear sight of what was possible and what was not, he could hope for a future for himself – a participation in public life – a part he had believed to be reserved for his son. And henceforward it would be the answer that he would make to himself; if ever a doubt entered his mind, it would be his revenge against the mute insults offered him by some backward peasants, who forgot to recognise him in the streets, and by certain citizens of Strasburg or Alsheim, who scarcely, or no longer, saluted him.

He was therefore now going to receive his son in a frame of mind very different from that of the past. To-day, when he knew himself in full personal favour with the Government of Alsace-Lorraine, he was less set on his son carrying out to the letter the plan that he had traced at first. Jean had already assisted his father, as Lucienne was assisting him. He had been an argument, and one of the causes of this long-expected change of the governmental attitude. His collaboration was still going to be useful, but not necessary; and the father, warned by certain allusions and a certain reticence in the last letters written from Berlin by his son, did not feel so irritated when he thought that perhaps he would not follow the career in the German magistracy so carefully prepared for him, and would give up his last three years of terms and his State examinations. Such were the reflections of this man, whose life had been guided by the most unadulterated egotism, at the moment when he was preparing to receive his son's visit. For he had seen Jean and had watched him coming across the park. M. Oberlé had built at the extreme end of the saw-mill a sort of cage or footbridge, from which he could survey everything at once. One window opened on to the timber yard, and allowed him to follow the movements of the men occupied in stowing away and transporting the wood. Another, composed of a double glazed framework, placed the book-keepers under the eye of their master, ranged along a wall in a room like the master's room; and by a third, that is to say by a glass partition, which separated him from the workshop, he took in at a glance the immense hall where machines of all kinds, great saws in leather bands, cogged wheels, drills, and planes, were cutting, boring, and polishing trunks of trees brought to them on sliding grooves. Round him the low woodwork painted water-green; electric lamps in the shape of violets, the call-buttons placed on a copper plaque which served as a pediment to his work bureau, a telephone, a typewriter, light chairs painted white, spoke of his taste for bright colours, for convenient innovations, and for fragile-looking objects.

Seeing his son enter, he had turned towards the window overlooking the park; he had crossed his legs, and placed his right elbow on the desk. He examined curiously this tall, thin, handsome man, his son, who sat down facing him, and he smiled. To see him thus, leaning back in his arm-chair, and smiling his own mechanical and irrelevant smile, by only judging from the full face framed by two grey whiskers, and the gesture of his raised right hand, touching his head and playing with the cord of his eyeglass, it would be easy to understand the mistake of those who took M. Oberlé for a magistrate. But the eyes, a little closed on account of the bright light, were too quick and too hard to belong to any but a man of action. They gave the lie to the mechanical smile of his lips. They had no scientific curiosity, worldly or paternal; they sought simply a way, like those of a ship's captain – in order to pass on. Scarcely had M. Oberlé asked, "What have you to tell me?" than he added, "Have you spoken with your mother this morning?"

"No!"

"With Lucienne?"

"Neither; I have just come from my room."

"It is better so. It is better for us to make our plans together, we two, without any one interfering. I have allowed you to return and to stay here precisely that we may arrange your future. Firstly, your military service in the month of October, with the fixed determination – am I right?" – and he dwelt on the following words – "to become an officer of the reserve?"

Jean, motionless, with head erect and straight look, and with the charming gravity of a young man who speaks of his future and who keeps a sort of quiet hold on himself which is not quite natural to him:

"Yes, father, that is my intention."

"The first point is then settled – and afterwards? You have seen the world. You know the people among whom you are called to live. You know that with regard to the German magistracy the chances of succeeding increased some time ago, because my own position has been considerably bettered in Alsace?"

"I know it."

"You know equally well that I have never wavered in my desire to see you follow the career which would have been mine if circumstances had not been stronger than my will."

As if this word had suddenly excited in him the strength to will, the eyes of M. Oberlé were fixed, imperious and masterful, on those of his son, like the claws of a bird of prey. He left off playing with his eyeglass, and said quickly:

"Your last letters indicated, however, a certain hesitation. Answer me. Will you become a magistrate?"

Jean became slightly pale, and answered:

"No!"

The father bent forward as if he were going to rise, and without taking his eyes off him whose moral energy he was weighing and judging at that moment:

"Administrator?"

"Neither. Nothing official."

"Then your law studies?"

"Useless."

"Because?"

"Because," said the young man, trying to steady his voice, "I have not the German spirit."

M. Oberlé had not expected this answer. It was a disavowal. He started, and instinctively looked into the workshop to make sure that no one had heard or even guessed at such words. He met the raised eyes of many workmen, who thought he was supervising the work, and who turned away at once.

M. Oberlé turned again to his son. A violent irritation had seized him. But he understood that it was best not to let it be seen. For fear that his hands should show his agitation, he had seized the two arms of the arm-chair in which he was seated, bent forward as before, but now considering this young man from head to foot, considering his attitude, his clothes, his manner, this young man who was voicing ideas which seemed like a judgment on the conduct of his father. After a moment of silence, his voice broken, he asked:

"Who has put you against me? Your mother?"

"No one," said Jean Oberlé quickly. "I have nothing against you. Why do you take it like that? I say simply that I have not the German spirit. It is the result of a long comparison, and nothing else."

M. Joseph Oberlé saw that he had shown his hand too much. He withdrew into himself, and putting on that expression of cold irony with which he was accustomed to disguise his true sentiments:

"Then, since you refuse to follow the career which I destined for you, have you chosen another?"

"Without doubt, with your consent."

"Which?"

"Yours. Do not be mistaken with regard to what I have just told you. I have lived without a quarrel for ten years in an exclusively German centre. I know what it has cost me. You ask me the

result of my experience. Well, I do not believe that my character is supple enough, or easy-going enough if you like, to do more than that, or to become a German official. I am sure that I should not always understand, and that I should disobey sometimes. My decision is irrevocable. And, on the contrary, your work pleases me."

"You imagine that a manufacturer is independent?"

"No; but he is more independent than many are. I studied law so that I should not refuse to follow without reflection, without examination, the way you pointed out to me. But I have profited by the travels which you suggested, every year."

"You may say which I imposed upon you; that is the truth, and I am going to explain my reasons."

"I have profited by them to study the forest industry wherever I could – in Germany, in Austria, in the Caucasus. I have given more thought and consideration to those questions than you might suppose. And I wish to live in Alsheim. Will you allow me to?"

The father did not answer at first. He was trying on his son an experiment to which he deliberately submitted other men who came to treat with him about some important affair. He was silent at the moment when decisive words were to be expected from him. If the questioner, disturbed, turned away to escape the look which seemed to be oppressive, or if he renewed the explanation already made, M. Joseph Oberlé classed him among weak men, his inferiors. Jean bore his father's look, and did not open his mouth. M. Oberlé was secretly flattered. He understood that he found himself in the presence of a man completely formed, of a very resolute, and probably inflexible spirit. He knew others like him in the neighbourhood. He secretly appreciated their independence of temper, and feared it. With the quickness of combination and organisation habitual to him, he perceived very clearly the industry of Alsheim directed by Jean, and the father of Jean, Joseph Oberlé, sitting in the Reichstag, admitted among the financiers, the administrators, and the powerful men of Germany. He was one of those who know how to turn his mistakes to some advantage, just as he managed to get something from the factory waste. This new vision softened him. Far from being angry, he let the ironical expression relax which he had put on while speaking of his son's project. With a movement of his hand he pointed to the immense workshop, where, without ceasing, with a roar which slightly shook the double windows, the steel blades entered into the heart of the old trees of the Vosges, and said, in a tone of affectionate scolding:

"So be it, my son. It will give joy to my father, to your mother, and to Ulrich. I agree that you put me in the wrong on one point with regard to them, but in one point only. Some years ago I should not have allowed you to refuse the career which seemed to me the best for you, and which would have saved us all from difficulties which you could not take the measure of. At that moment you were not able to judge for yourself. And further, I found my work, my position, too precarious and too dangerous to pass it on to you. That has changed. My business has increased. Life has become possible for me and for you all, thanks to the efforts, and perhaps to the sacrifices, for which those about me are not sufficiently grateful. To-day I admit that the business has a future. You wish to succeed me? I open the door for you immediately! You will go through the practical part of your apprenticeship in the seven months which remain before you join your regiment. Yes, I consent, but on one condition."

"Which?"

"You will not mix yourself up with politics."

"I have no taste for politics."

"Ah, excuse me," continued M. Oberlé with animation; "we must understand one another, must we not? I do not think you have any political ambition for yourself; you are not old enough, and perhaps you are not of the right stuff. And that is not what I forbid – I forbid you to have anything to do with Alsatian chauvinism; to go about repeating, as others do, on every occasion – 'France, France'; to wear under your waistcoat a tricolour belt; to imitate the Alsatian students of Strasburg,

who, to recognise and encourage one another, and for the fun of it, whistle in the ears of the police the six notes of the Marseillaise 'Form your battalions.' I won't have any of those little proceedings, of those little bravadoes, and of those great risks, my dear fellow! They are forbidden manifestations for us business men who work in a German country. They go against our efforts and interests, for it is not France who buys. France is very far away, my dear fellow; she is more than two hundred leagues from here, at least one would think so, considering the little noise, movement, or money which come to us from there. Do not forget that! You are by your own wish a German manufacturer; if you turn your back on the Germans you are lost. Think what you please about the history of your country, of its past, and of its present. I am ignorant of your opinions on that subject. I will not try to guess what they will be in a neighbourhood so behind the times as ours at Alsheim; but whatever you think, either try to hold your tongue, or make a career for yourself elsewhere."

A smile stole round Jean's turned-up moustache, while the upper part of his face remained grave and firm.

"You are asking yourself, I am sure, what I think about France?"

"Let us hear."

"I love her."

"You do not know her!"

"I have read her history and her literature carefully, and I have compared: that is all. When one is oneself of the nation, that enables one to divine much. I do not know it otherwise, it is true. You have taken your precautions."

"What you say is true, though at the same time you intended to wound – "

"Not at all."

"Yes, I have taken my precautions, in order to free your sister and you from that deadly spirit of opposition which would have made your lives barren from the beginning, which would have made you discontented people, powerless, poor; there are too many people of that sort in Alsace, who render no service to France or to Alsace, or to themselves, by perpetually furnishing Germany with reasons for anger. I do not regret that you make me explain myself as to the system of education which I desired for you, and which I alone desired. I wished to spare you the trial I have borne, of which I have just spoken to you: to fail in life. There is still another reason. Ah, I know well that credit will not be given me for that! I am obliged to praise myself in my own family. My child, it is not possible to have been brought up in France, to belong to France through all one's ancestry, and not to love French culture."

He interrupted himself a moment to see the impression this phrase produced, and he could see nothing, not a movement on the impassible face of his son, who decidedly was a highly self-controlled man. The implacable desire for justification which governed M. Oberlé, made him go on:

"You know that the French language is not favourably looked upon here, my dear Jean. In Bavaria you had a literary and historical education, better from that point of view than you would have had in Strasburg. I was able to desire, without prejudicing your masters against you, that you should have many extra French lessons. In Alsace, you and I would both have suffered for that. Those are the motives which guided me. Experience will show whether I was mistaken. I did it in any case in good faith, and for your good."

"My dear father," said Jean, "I have no right to judge what you have done. What I can tell you is that, thanks to that education I have received, if I have not an unbounded taste or admiration for German civilisation, I have at least the habit of living with the Germans. And I am persuaded that I could live with them in Alsace."

The father raised his eyebrows as if he would say, "I am not so sure of that."

"My ideas, up to now, have made me no enemy in Germany; and it seems to me that one can direct a saw-mill in an annexed country with the opinions I have just shown you."

"I hope so," said M. Oberlé simply.

"Then you accept me? I come to you?"

For answer the master pressed his finger on an electric button.

A man came up the steps which led from the machine hall to the observatory that M. Oberlé had had built, and opened the port-hole, and in the opening one saw a square blond beard, long hair, and two eyes like two blue gems.

"Wilhelm," said the master in German, "you will make my son conversant with the works, and you will explain to him the purchases we have made for the past six months. From to-morrow he will accompany you in your round of visits to where the fellings and cuttings are being carried out in the interests of the firm."

The door was shut again.

That young enthusiast, the elegant Jean Oberlé, was standing in front of his father. He held out his hand to him and said, pale with joy:

"Now I am again some one in Alsace! How I thank you!"

The father took his son's hand with a somewhat studied effusion. He thought:

"He is the image of his mother! In him I find again the spirit, the words, and the enthusiasm of Monica." Aloud he said:

"You see, my son, that I have only one aim in view, to make you happy. I have always had it. I agree to your adopting a career quite different from the one I chose for you. Try now to understand our position as your sister understands it."

Jean went away, and his father, a few minutes later, went out also. But while M. Joseph Oberlé went towards the house, being in haste to see his daughter, the only confidante of his thoughts, and to report the conversation he had just had with Jean, the latter crossed the timber yard to the left, passed before the lodge, and took the road to the forest. But he did not go far, because the luncheon hour was approaching. By the road that wound upward he reached the region of the vineyards of Alsheim, beyond the hop-fields which were still bare, where the poles rose tied together, like a stack of arms. His soul was glad. When he came to the entrance of a vineyard which he had known since his earliest childhood, where he had gathered the grapes in the days of long ago, he climbed on to a hill which overlooked the road and the rows of vines at the bottom. In spite of the grey light, in spite of the clouds and the wind, he found his Alsace beautiful, divinely beautiful – Alsace, sloping down very gently in front of him, and becoming a smooth plain with strips of grass and strips of ploughed land, and whence the villages here and there lifted their tile roofs and the point of their belfries. Round, isolated trees – leafless because it was winter – resembled dry thistles; some crows were flying, helped by the north wind, and seeking a newly sown spot.

Jean raised his hands, and spread them as if to embrace the expanse of land stretching out from Obernai, which he saw in the farthest undulations to the left, as far as Barr, half buried under the avalanche of pines down the mountain-side. "I love thee, Alsace, and I have come back to thee!" he cried. He gazed at the village of Alsheim, at the house of red stone which rose a little below him, and which was his; then at the other extremity of the pile of houses, inhabited by the workmen and peasants, he marked a sort of forest promontory which pushed out into the smooth plain. It was an avenue ending in a great group of leafless trees, grey, between which one could see the slopes of a roof. Jean let his eyes rest a long time on this half-hidden dwelling, and said: "Good day, Alsatian woman! Perhaps I am going to find that I love you. It would be so good to live here with you!"

The bell rang for luncheon, rang out from the Oberlés' house, and recalled him to himself. It had a thin, miserable sound, which gave some idea of the immensity of free space in which the noise vanished away, and the strength of the tide of the wind which carried it away over the lands of Alsace.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST FAMILY MEETING

Jean turned slowly towards this bell which was calling him. He was full of joy at this moment. He was taking possession of a world which, after some years, had just been opened to him and pointed out as his place of habitation, of work, and of happiness. These words played on his troubled mind deliciously. They pursued each other like a troop of porpoises, those travellers on the surface, and other words accompanied them. Family life, comfort, social authority, embellishments, enlargements. The house took to itself a name – "the paternal home." He looked at it with tenderness, following the alley near the stream; he went up the steps with a feeling of respect, remembering that they had been built by the grandfather to whom the house still belonged, as also all the grounds except the saw-mill and the timber yard.

After having gone across the entrance hall, which extended from the front to the back of the house, he opened the last door on the left. The dining-room was the only room which had been "done up" according to the directions and the taste of M. Joseph Oberlé. Whilst one found elsewhere – in the drawing-room, the billiard-room, and the other rooms – the furniture bought by the grandfather, of yellow or green Utrecht velvet and mahogany, "My Creation," according to the expression of M. Joseph Oberlé, showed a complete absence of line. Colour took the place of style. The walls were covered with wainscoting of veined maple, blue-grey, purple in places, ash-grey, and pink-grey, covering half the height of the room. Above this, and reaching to the small beams, were four panels of stretched cloth, decorated with designs of smooth felt representing irises, hollyhocks, verbena, and gladioli. Everywhere, as far as possible, the straight line had been modified. The door mouldings described curves which rambled madly like stalks of tropical bindweed without any apparent reason. The framework of the large window was curved. The chairs of bent beechwood came from Vienna. The whole had no character, but a charm of softened light, and a remote resemblance to the vegetable kingdom. One would have taken it for the dining-room of a newly married couple.

The four usual table companions Jean was going to meet there hardly corresponded to this joyous picture, and there was no harmony between them and the decorations of the room. They invariably sat in the same places, round the square table, according to the established order of deep affinities and antipathies.

The first to the left of the window, the nearest to the glass, which shed on her the reflection of its levelled edges, was Madame Monica Oberlé, tall and slender, with a face that had been rounded and fresh, but was now pale, lined, and thin. She gave the impression of a being accustomed only to hear around her the words "You are wrong." Her short-sighted eyes, very gentle, glanced at the guests who were introduced to her with a smile always ready to withdraw and fade away. They only paused after they had looked about for a little time, when nothing had repulsed or misunderstood them. Then they revealed a clear intelligence, a very kind heart, become a little shy and sad, but still capable of illusions and outbursts of youth. No one could have had a more careless youth, nor one that seemed a less fitting preparation for the part she had to play later. She was then called Monica Biehler, of the ancient family Biehler of Obernai. From the top of her father's house, whose fortified gable-end rises on the ramparts of the little town, she saw the immense plain all round her. The garden full of trimmed box and pear-trees, and hawthorn, where she played, was only separated by an iron railing from the public promenade built on the old wall, so that the vision of Alsace was printed each day on this child's soul, and at the same time love of her country, so happy then – love of its beauty, its peace, and its liberty, of its villages, whose names she knew, whose rosy bunches of grapes she could have pointed out among the harvest fields. Monica Biehler knew nothing else. She only left Obernai to go with all the family to spend two summer months in the lodge at Heidenbruch, in the

Forest of Sainte Odile. Only once did she happen to cross the Vosges, the year before her wedding, to make a pilgrimage to Domrémy in Lorraine. Those had been three days full of enthusiasm. Madame Oberlé remembered those three days as the purest joy of her life. She would say: "My journey in France." She had remained simple; she had kept, in her very retired life at Alsheim, the easy fears, but also the sincerity – the secret boldness of her youthful affection for the country and for the country people. She had therefore suffered more than another would have done in her place, in seeing her husband draw near to the German party in Alsace, and finally join it. She had suffered in her Alsatian pride, and still more in her maternal love. For the same cause which separated her morally from her husband, her children were taken from her. The lines on her face, faded before its time, could each have borne a name, that of the grief which had scored them there: the line of despised goodness, the line of useless warnings, the line of her insulted country, of separation from Jean and Lucienne, of the uselessness of the treasure of love she had stored up for them during her single and married life.

Her bitterness had been the greater because Madame Oberlé had no illusions as to the true motives which guided her husband. And this he had divined. He was humiliated by this witness whom he could not deceive, and whom he could not help esteeming. She personified for him the cause which he had abandoned. It was to her he spoke when he felt the need of justifying himself, and he did so whenever he had the chance. It was against her that his anger rose, against her mute disapproval. Never once in twenty years had he been able to get her to agree – not by one word – that Alsace was German. This timid woman yielded to force but she did not approve of it. She followed her husband into German society; there she bore herself with such dignity that one could neither deceive oneself as to her attitude, nor bear a grudge against her for it. There she safeguarded more than appearances. A mother, separated from her children, she had not separated herself from her husband. They still used the twin-bedsteads in the same room. They had continual scenes, sometimes on one side, sometimes acrimonious and violent on both sides. Nevertheless Madame Oberlé understood that her husband only hated her clear-sightedness and judgment. She hoped she would not always be in the wrong. Now that the children were grown up she believed that some very important decisions would have to be made with regard to them, and that by her long patience and by her numerous concessions she had perhaps gained the right to speak then and be heard.

Near her, and at her right, the grandfather, M. Philippe Oberlé, had always sat. For some years, five minutes before the time of the meal the dining-room door would open, the old man would come in, leaning on the arm of his valet, trying to walk straight, clothed in an anomalous garment of dark wool, his red ribbon in his button-hole, his head weary and bent, his eyelids nearly closed, his face swollen and bloodless. They placed him in a large chair with arms upholstered in grey; they tied his table napkin round his neck, and he waited, his body leaning against the chair-back, his hands on the table – hands pale as wax, in which the knotted blue veins were distinctly visible. When the others arrived M. Joseph Oberlé shook him by the hand; Lucienne threw him a kiss and a number of words audibly spoken in her fresh young voice; Madame Oberlé bent down and pressed her faithful lips on the old man's forehead. He thanked her by watching her sit down. He did not look at the others. Then he made the sign of the cross, she and he alone, being a son of that old Alsace which still prayed. And served by this neighbour so silently charitable, who knew all his tastes, his shame of a certain clumsiness, and who forestalled his wishes, he began to eat, slowly, with difficulty moving his relaxed muscles. His dreamy head remained leaning against the chair. His head alone was watching in a body nearly destroyed. It was the theatre where, for the pleasure and pain of one alone, there passed before his mental vision the forebears of those whose names were mentioned before him. He did not speak, but he remembered. Sometimes he drew from his pocket a schoolboy's slate and pencil, and he wrote, with an uncertain writing, two or three words, which he made his neighbour read; some rectification, some forgotten date, his approval or disapproval to join in with the words just spoken on the other side of the table. Generally they knew when he was interested by the movement of his heavy eyelids. It was only for a moment. Life sank again to the depth of the prison whose bars she had tried to

shake. Night closed in once more round those thoughts of his, unable to make themselves intelligible. And in spite of being accustomed to it, the sight of this suffering and of this ruin weighed on each of the members of the assembled family. It was less painful to strangers who sat for one evening at the Alsheim table, for the grandfather on those days did not try to break the circle of darkness and death which oppressed him. Until these last years M. Joseph Oberlé had always continued to present his guests to his father, up to the day when he wrote on his slate: "Do not present any one to me, above all, no Germans. Let them acknowledge my presence: that will be enough." The son had kept the habit – and it was a touching thought on the part of this selfish man – to give every evening an account of the business of the factory to the old chief. After dinner, smoking in the dining-room, while the two women went into the drawing-room, he told him all about the day's mail, the consignments, and the purchases of wood. Although M. Philippe Oberlé was now only the sleeping partner of the business he had founded, he was under the illusion that he was advising and directing still. He heard talk of the maples, pines and firs, oaks and beeches among which he had breathed for fifty years. He thought much of the "conference," as he called it, as the only moment in the day in which he appeared himself, to himself, and as some one of importance in the lives of others. Except for that he was only a shadow, a dumb soul present, who judged his house, but rarely gave voice to his decision.

His son on some important question disagreed with him. Seated at table just opposite his father, M. Joseph Oberlé could make a show of addressing himself to his wife and daughter only; during the whole of the meal he could avoid seeing the fingers which moved impatiently or which wrote to Madame Oberlé, but he was not the man to keep off painful subjects. Like all those who have had to make a great decision in their lives, and who have not taken it without a profound disturbance of their conscience, he was always reverting to the German Question. Everything gave him a pretext to begin it, praise or blame – various facts, political events announced in the morning's newspaper, a visiting card brought by the postman, an order for planks received from Hanover or Dresden, the wish expressed by Lucienne to accept an invitation to some ball. He felt the need of applauding himself for what he had done, like defeated generals who want to explain the battle, and to demonstrate how the force of circumstances had compelled them to act in such or such a manner. All the resources of his fertile mind were brought to bear on this case of conscience, on which he declared himself a long time resolute, and which aroused no more discussion, either on the part of the sick grandfather or on that of the depressed wife, who had decided to keep silence.

Lucienne alone approved and supported her father.

She did it with the decision of youth, which judges without consideration the grief of old people, the memories and all the charm of the past, without understanding, and as if they were dead things to be dealt with by reason only. She was only twenty, at once very proud and very sincere; she had an artless confidence in herself, an impetuous nature, and a reputation for beauty only partly justified. Tall, like her mother, and, like her, well made, she had her father's larger features more conformed to the usual Alsatian type – with a tendency to thicken. All the lines of her body were already formed and fully developed. To those who saw her for the first time, Lucienne Oberlé gave the impression of being a young woman rather than a young girl. Her face was extremely open and mobile. When she listened, her eyes – not so large as, and of a lighter green than, her brother's, her eyes and her mouth equally sharp when she smiled – followed the conversation and told her thoughts. She dreamed little. Another charm besides the vivacity of her mind explained her social success: the incomparable brightness of her complexion, of her red lips, the splendour of her fair hair, with its shining tresses of blonde and auburn intermingled, so abundant and so heavy that it broke tortoise-shell combs, escaped from hairpins, and hung down behind in a heavy mass and obliged her to raise her brow, which was enhaled by the light from it, and gave to Lucienne Oberlé the carriage of a proud young goddess.

Her Uncle Ulrich said to her, laughing: "When I kiss you, I think I am kissing a peach growing in the open air." She walked well; she played tennis well; she swam to perfection, and more than once

the papers of Baden-Baden had printed the initials of her name in articles in which they spoke of "our best skaters."

This physical education had already alienated her from her mother, who had never been more than a good walker, and was now only a fair one. But other causes had been at work and had separated them more deeply and more irrevocably from each other. Doubtless it was the entirely German education of the Mündner school, more scientific, more solemn, more pedantic, more varied, and much less pious than that which her mother had received, who had been educated partly at Obernai, and partly with the nuns of Notre-Dame, in the convent of the rue des Mineurs in Strasburg. But above all it was owing to the acquaintances she made, and her surroundings. Lucienne, ambitious like her father, like him bent on success, entirely removed from maternal influence, entrusted to German mistresses for seven years, received in German families, living among pupils chiefly German, flattered a little by everybody – here because of the charm of her nature, there for political motives and unconscious proselytism, Lucienne had formed habits of mind very different from those of old Alsace. Once more at home, she no longer understood the past of her people or her family. For her, those who stood up for the old state of things or regretted it – her mother, her grandfather, her uncle Ulrich – were the representatives of an epoch ended, of an unreasonable and childish attitude of mind. At once she placed herself on her father's side against the others. And she suffered from it. It depressed her to be brought into such close contact with persons of this sort, whom the Mündner school and all her worldly acquaintances of Baden-Baden and Strasburg would look upon as behind the times. For two years she had lived in an atmosphere of contradiction. For her family she felt conflicting sentiments; for her mother, for example, she felt a true tenderness and a great pity because she belonged to a condemned society and to another century. She had no confidants. Would her brother Jean be one? Restless at his arrival, almost a stranger to him, desiring affection, worn out with family quarrels, and hoping that Jean would place himself on the side she had chosen, that he would be a support and a new argument, she at once desired and feared this meeting. Her father came to tell her of the conversation he had had with Jean. She had said – cried out rather – "Thank you for giving me my brother!"

They were all four at table when the young man entered the dining-room. The two women who were facing each other and in the light of the window, turned their heads, one sweetly with a smile that said, "How proud I am of my child!"; the other leaning back on her chair, her lips half open, her eyes as tender as if he had been her betrothed who entered, desirous to please and sure of pleasing him, saying aloud: "Come and sit here near me, at the end of the table. I have made myself fine in your honour! Look!" and kissing him, she said in a low tone, "Oh, how good it is to have some one young to say good morning to!" She knew she was pleasant to look upon in her bodice of mauve surah silk trimmed with lace insertion. It also gave her real pleasure to meet this brother whom she had only seen for a moment last night, before catching the train to Strasburg. Jean thanked her with a friendly glance and seated himself at the end of the table between Lucienne and his mother. He unfolded his table napkin, and the servant Victor, son of an Alsatian farmer, with his full-moon face and eyes like a little girl's, always afraid of doing something wrong, approached him, carrying a dish of *hors-d'œuvre*, when M. Joseph Oberlé, who had just finished writing a note in his pocket-book, stroked his whiskers and said:

"You see Jean Oberlé here present, you my father, you Monica, and you Lucienne. Well, I have a piece of news to give you concerning him. I have agreed that he shall live definitely at Alsheim and become a manufacturer and a wood merchant."

Three faces coloured at once; even Victor, shaking like a leaf, withdrew his *hors-d'œuvre* dish.

"Is it possible?" said Lucienne, who did not wish to let her mother see that she had already been told of the arrangement. "Will he not finish his referendary course?"

"No."

"After his year's service he will come back here for always?"

"Yes; to stay with us always."

The second moment of emotion is sometimes more unnerving than the first. Lucienne's eyelids fluttered quickly and became moist. She laughed at the same time, tender words trembling on her red lips.

"Oh," said she, "so much the better. I don't know if it is in your own interest, Jean, but for us, so much the better."

She was really pretty at that moment, leaning towards her brother, vibrating with a joy which was not feigned.

"I thank you," said Madame Oberlé, looking gravely at her husband to try to guess what reason he had obeyed; "I thank you, Joseph; I should not have dared to ask it of you."

"But you see, my dear," answered the manufacturer, bending towards her, "you see, when proposals are reasonable I accept them. Besides, I am so little accustomed to be thanked that for once the word pleases me. Yes; we have just had a decisive conversation. Jean will accompany my buyer to-morrow and visit some of our cuttings in work. I never lose time – you know that."

Madame Oberlé saw the awkward hand of the grandfather stretch towards her. She took the slate which he held and read this line:

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