

# **THE BLACK SHEEP**

**BY**  
**HONORE DE BALZAC**

**1842**

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## DEDICATION

**To Monsieur Charles Nodier, member of the French Academy, etc.**

Here, my dear Nodier, is a book filled with deeds that are screened from the action of the laws by the closed doors of domestic life; but as to which the finger of God, often called chance, supplies the place of human justice, and in which the moral is none the less striking and instructive because it is pointed by a scoffer.

To my mind, such deeds contain great lessons for the Family and for Maternity. We shall some day realize, perhaps too late, the effects produced by the diminution of paternal authority. That authority, which formerly ceased only at the death of the father, was the sole human tribunal before which domestic crimes could be arraigned; kings themselves, on special occasions, took part in executing its judgments. However good and tender a mother may be, she cannot fulfil the function of the patriarchal royalty any more than a woman can take the place of a king upon the throne. Perhaps I have never drawn a picture that shows more plainly how essential to European society is the indissoluble marriage bond, how fatal the results of feminine weakness, how great the dangers arising from selfish interests when indulged without restraint. May a society which is based solely on the power of wealth shudder as it sees the impotence of the law in dealing with the workings of a system which deifies success, and pardons every means of attaining it. May it return to the Catholic religion, for the purification of its masses through the inspiration of religious feeling, and by means of an education other than that of a lay university.

In the "Scenes from Military Life" so many fine natures, so many high and noble self-devotions will be set forth, that I may here be allowed to point out the depraving effect of the necessities of war upon certain minds who venture to act in domestic life as if upon the field of battle.

You have cast a sagacious glance over the events of our own time; its philosophy shines, in more than one bitter reflection, through your elegant pages; you have appreciated, more clearly than other men, the havoc wrought in the mind of our country by the existence of four distinct political systems. I cannot, therefore, place this history under the protection of a more competent authority. Your name may, perhaps, defend my work against the criticisms that are certain to follow it,—for where is the patient who keeps silence when the surgeon lifts the dressing from his wound?

To the pleasure of dedicating this Scene to you, is joined the pride I feel in thus making known your friendship for one who here subscribes himself

*Your sincere admirer,*

*De Balzac*

*Paris, November, 1842.*

## CHAPTER I

In 1792 the townspeople of Issoudun enjoyed the services of a physician named Rouget, whom they held to be a man of consummate malignity. Were we to believe certain bold tongues, he made his wife extremely unhappy, although she was the most beautiful woman of the neighborhood. Perhaps, indeed, she was rather silly. But the prying of friends, the slander of enemies, and the gossip of acquaintances, had never succeeded in laying bare the interior of that household. Doctor Rouget was a man of whom we say in common parlance, "He is not pleasant to deal with." Consequently, during his lifetime, his townsmen kept silence about him and treated him civilly. His wife, a demoiselle Descoings, feeble in health during her girlhood (which was said to be a reason why the doctor married her), gave birth to a son, and also to a daughter who arrived, unexpectedly, ten years after her brother, and whose birth took the husband, doctor though he were, by surprise. This late-comer was named Agathe.

These little facts are so simple, so commonplace, that a writer seems scarcely justified in placing them in the fore-front of his history; yet if they are not known, a man of Doctor Rouget's stamp would be thought a monster, an unnatural father, when, in point of fact, he was only following out the evil tendencies which many people shelter under the terrible axiom that "men should have strength of character,"—a masculine phrase that has caused many a woman's misery.

The Descoings, father-in-law and mother-in-law of the doctor, were commission merchants in the wool-trade, and did a double business by selling for the producers and buying for the manufacturers of the golden fleeces of Berry; thus pocketing a commission on both sides. In this way they grew rich and miserly—the outcome of many such lives. Descoings the son, younger brother of Madame Rouget, did not like Issoudun. He went to seek

his fortune in Paris, where he set up as a grocer in the rue Saint-Honore. That step led to his ruin. But nothing could have hindered it: a grocer is drawn to his business by an attracting force quite equal to the repelling force which drives artists away from it. We do not sufficiently study the social potentialities which make up the various vocations of life. It would be interesting to know what determines one man to be a stationer rather than a baker; since, in our day, sons are not compelled to follow the calling of their fathers, as they were among the Egyptians. In this instance, love decided the vocation of Descoings. He said to himself, "I, too, will be a grocer!" and in the same breath he said (also to himself) some other things regarding his employer,—a beautiful creature, with whom he had fallen desperately in love. Without other help than patience and the trifling sum of money his father and mother sent him, he married the widow of his predecessor, Monsieur Bixiou.

In 1792 Descoings was thought to be doing an excellent business. At that time, the old Descoings were still living. They had retired from the wool-trade, and were employing their capital in buying up the forfeited estates,—another golden fleece! Their son-in-law Doctor Rouget, who, about this time, felt pretty sure that he should soon have to mourn for the death of his wife, sent his daughter to Paris to the care of his brother-in-law, partly to let her see the capital, but still more to carry out an artful scheme of his own. Descoings had no children. Madame Descoings, twelve years older than her husband, was in good health, but as fat as a thrush after harvest; and the canny Rouget knew enough professionally to be certain that Monsieur and Madame Descoings, contrary to the moral of fairy tales, would live happy ever after without having any children. The pair might therefore become attached to Agathe.

That young girl, the handsomest maiden in Issoudun, did not resemble either father or mother. Her birth had caused a lasting breach between Doctor Rouget and his intimate friend Monsieur Lousteau, a former sub-delegate who had lately removed from the town. When a family expatriates itself, the natives of a place as attractive as Issoudun have a right to inquire into the reasons of so

surprising a step. It was said by certain sharp tongues that Doctor Rouget, a vindictive man, had been heard to exclaim that Monsieur Lousteau should die by his hand. Uttered by a physician, this declaration had the force of a cannon-ball. When the National Assembly suppressed the sub-delegates, Lousteau and his family left Issoudun, and never returned there. After their departure Madame Rouget spent most of her time with the sister of the late sub-delegate, Madame Hochon, who was the godmother of her daughter, and the only person to whom she confided her griefs. The little that the good town of Issoudun ever really knew of the beautiful Madame Rouget was told by Madame Hochon,—though not until after the doctor's death.

The first words of Madame Rouget, when informed by her husband that he meant to send Agathe to Paris, were: "I shall never see my daughter again."

"And she was right," said the worthy Madame Hochon.

After this, the poor mother grew as yellow as a quince, and her appearance did not contradict the tongues of those who declared that Doctor Rouget was killing her by inches. The behavior of her booby of a son must have added to the misery of the poor woman so unjustly accused. Not restrained, possibly encouraged by his father, the young fellow, who was in every way stupid, paid her neither the attentions nor the respect which a son owes to a mother. Jean-Jacques Rouget was like his father, especially on the latter's worst side; and the doctor at his best was far from satisfactory, either morally or physically.

The arrival of the charming Agathe Rouget did not bring happiness to her uncle Descoings; for in the same week (or rather, we should say decade, for the Republic had then been proclaimed) he was imprisoned on a hint from Robespierre given to Fouquier-Tinville. Descoings, who was imprudent enough to think the famine fictitious, had the additional folly, under the impression that opinions were free, to express that opinion to several of his male and female customers as he served them in the grocery. The citoyenne Duplay,

wife of a cabinet-maker with whom Robespierre lodged, and who looked after the affairs of that eminent citizen, patronized, unfortunately, the Descoings establishment. She considered the opinions of the grocer insulting to Maximilian the First. Already displeased with the manners of Descoings, this illustrious "tricoteuse" of the Jacobin club regarded the beauty of his wife as a kind of aristocracy. She infused a venom of her own into the grocer's remarks when she repeated them to her good and gentle master, and the poor man was speedily arrested on the well-worn charge of "accapuration."

No sooner was he put in prison, than his wife set to work to obtain his release. But the steps she took were so ill-judged that any one hearing her talk to the arbiters of his fate might have thought that she was in reality seeking to get rid of him. Madame Descoings knew Bridau, one of the secretaries of Roland, then minister of the interior,—the right-hand man of all the ministers who succeeded each other in that office. She put Bridau on the war-path to save her grocer. That incorruptible official—one of the virtuous dupes who are always admirably disinterested—was careful not to corrupt the men on whom the fate of the poor grocer depended; on the contrary, he endeavored to enlighten them. Enlighten people in those days! As well might he have begged them to bring back the Bourbons. The Girondist minister, who was then contending against Robespierre, said to his secretary, "Why do you meddle in the matter?" and all others to whom the worthy Bridau appealed made the same atrocious reply: "Why do you meddle?" Bridau then sagely advised Madame Descoings to keep quiet and await events. But instead of conciliating Robespierre's housekeeper, she fretted and fumed against that informer, and even complained to a member of the Convention, who, trembling for himself, replied hastily, "I will speak of it to Robespierre." The handsome petitioner put faith in this promise, which the other carefully forgot. A few loaves of sugar, or a bottle or two of good liqueur, given to the citoyenne Duplay would have saved Descoings.



This little mishap proves that in revolutionary times it is quite as dangerous to employ honest men as scoundrels; we should rely on ourselves alone. Descoings perished; but he had the glory of going to the scaffold with Andre Chenier. There, no doubt, grocery and poetry embraced for the first time in the flesh; although they have, and ever have had, intimate secret relations. The death of Descoings produced far more sensation than that of Andre Chenier. It has taken thirty years to prove to France that she lost more by the death of Chenier than by that of Descoings.

This act of Robespierre led to one good result: the terrified grocers let politics alone until 1830. Descoings's shop was not a hundred yards from Robespierre's lodging. His successor was scarcely more fortunate than himself. Cesar Birotteau, the celebrated perfumer of the "Queen of Roses," bought the premises; but, as if the scaffold had left some inexplicable contagion behind it, the inventor of the "Paste of Sultans" and the "Carminative Balm" came to his ruin in that very shop. The solution of the problem here suggested belongs to the realm of occult science.

During the visits which Roland's secretary paid to the unfortunate Madame Descoings, he was struck with the cold, calm, innocent beauty of Agathe Rouget. While consoling the widow, who, however, was too inconsolable to carry on the business of her second deceased husband, he married the charming girl, with the consent of her father, who hastened to give his approval to the match. Doctor Rouget, delighted to hear that matters were going beyond his expectations,—for his wife, on the death of her brother, had become sole heiress of the Descoings,—rushed to Paris, not so much to be present at the wedding as to see that the marriage contract was drawn to suit him. The ardent and disinterested love of citizen Bridau gave carte blanche to the perfidious doctor, who made the most of his son-in-law's blindness, as the following history will show.

Madame Rouget, or, to speak more correctly, the doctor, inherited all the property, landed and personal, of Monsieur and Madame

Descoings the elder, who died within two years of each other; and soon after that, Rouget got the better, as we may say, of his wife, for she died at the beginning of the year 1799. So he had vineyards and he bought farms, he owned iron-works and he sold fleeces. His well-beloved son was stupidly incapable of doing anything; but the father destined him for the state in life of a land proprietor and allowed him to grow up in wealth and silliness, certain that the lad would know as much as the wisest if he simply let himself live and die. After 1799, the cipherers of Issoudun put, at the very least, thirty thousand francs' income to the doctor's credit. From the time of his wife's death he led a debauched life, though he regulated it, so to speak, and kept it within the closed doors of his own house. This man, endowed with "strength of character," died in 1805, and God only knows what the townspeople of Issoudun said about him then, and how many anecdotes they related of his horrible private life. Jean-Jacques Rouget, whom his father, recognizing his stupidity, had latterly treated with severity, remained a bachelor for certain reasons, the explanation of which will form an important part of this history. His celibacy was partly his father's fault, as we shall see later.

Meantime, it is well to inquire into the results of the secret vengeance the doctor took on a daughter whom he did not recognize as his own, but who, you must understand at once, was legitimately his. Not a person in Issoudun had noticed one of those capricious facts that make the whole subject of generation a vast abyss in which science flounders. Agathe bore a strong likeness to the mother of Doctor Rouget. Just as gout is said to skip a generation and pass from grandfather to grandson, resemblances not uncommonly follow the same course.

In like manner, the eldest of Agathe's children, who physically resembled his mother, had the moral qualities of his grandfather, Doctor Rouget. We will leave the solution of this problem to the twentieth century, with a fine collection of microscopic animalculae; our descendants may perhaps write as much nonsense as the

scientific schools of the nineteenth century have uttered on this mysterious and perplexing question.

Agathe Rouget attracted the admiration of everyone by a face destined, like that of Mary, the mother of our Lord, to continue ever virgin, even after marriage. Her portrait, still to be seen in the atelier of Bridau, shows a perfect oval and a clear whiteness of complexion, without the faintest tinge of color, in spite of her golden hair. More than one artist, looking at the pure brow, the discreet, composed mouth, the delicate nose, the small ears, the long lashes, and the dark-blue eyes filled with tenderness,—in short, at the whole countenance expressive of placidity,—has asked the great artist, "Is that a copy of a Raphael?" No man ever acted under a truer inspiration than the minister's secretary when he married this young girl. Agathe was an embodiment of the ideal housekeeper brought up in the provinces and never parted from her mother. Pious, though far from sanctimonious, she had no other education than that given to women by the Church. Judged, by ordinary standards, she was an accomplished wife, yet her ignorance of life paved the way for great misfortunes. The epitaph on the Roman matron, "She did needlework and kept the house," gives a faithful picture of her simple, pure, and tranquil existence.

Under the Consulate, Bridau attached himself fanatically to Napoleon, who placed him at the head of a department in the ministry of the interior in 1804, a year before the death of Doctor Rouget. With a salary of twelve thousand francs and very handsome emoluments, Bridau was quite indifferent to the scandalous settlement of the property at Issoudun, by which Agathe was deprived of her rightful inheritance. Six months before Doctor Rouget's death he had sold one-half of his property to his son, to whom the other half was bequeathed as a gift, and also in accordance with his rights as heir. An advance of fifty thousand francs on her inheritance, made to Agathe at the time of her marriage, represented her share of the property of her father and mother.

Bridau idolized the Emperor, and served him with the devotion of a Mohammedan for his prophet; striving to carry out the vast conceptions of the modern demi-god, who, finding the whole fabric of France destroyed, went to work to reconstruct everything. The new official never showed fatigue, never cried "Enough." Projects, reports, notes, studies, he accepted all, even the hardest labors, happy in the consciousness of aiding his Emperor. He loved him as a man, he adored him as a sovereign, and he would never allow the least criticism of his acts or his purposes.

From 1804 to 1808, the Bridaus lived in a handsome suite of rooms on the Quai Voltaire, a few steps from the ministry of the interior and close to the Tuileries. A cook and footman were the only servants of the household during this period of Madame Bridau's grandeur. Agathe, early afoot, went to market with her cook. While the latter did the rooms, she prepared the breakfast. Bridau never went to the ministry before eleven o'clock. As long as their union lasted, his wife took the same unwearying pleasure in preparing for him an exquisite breakfast, the only meal he really enjoyed. At all seasons and in all weathers, Agathe watched her husband from the window as he walked toward his office, and never drew in her head until she had seen him turn the corner of the rue du Bac. Then she cleared the breakfast-table herself, gave an eye to the arrangement of the rooms, dressed for the day, played with her children and took them to walk, or received the visits of friends; all the while waiting in spirit for Bridau's return. If her husband brought him important business that had to be attended to, she would station herself close to the writing-table in his study, silent as a statue, knitting while he wrote, sitting up as late as he did, and going to bed only a few moments before him. Occasionally, the pair went to some theatre, occupying one of the ministerial boxes. On those days, they dined at a restaurant, and the gay scenes of that establishment never ceased to give Madame Bridau the same lively pleasure they afford to provincials who are new to Paris. Agathe, who was obliged to accept the formal dinners sometimes given to the head of a department in a ministry, paid due attention to the luxurious

requirements of the then mode of dress, but she took off the rich apparel with delight when she returned home, and resumed the simple garb of a provincial. One day in the week, Thursday, Bridau received his friends, and he also gave a grand ball, annually, on Shrove Tuesday.

These few words contain the whole history of their conjugal life, which had but three events; the births of two children, born three years apart, and the death of Bridau, who died in 1808, killed by overwork at the very moment when the Emperor was about to appoint him director-general, count, and councillor of state. At this period of his reign, Napoleon was particularly absorbed in the affairs of the interior; he overwhelmed Bridau with work, and finally wrecked the health of that dauntless bureaucrat. The Emperor, of whom Bridau had never asked a favor, made inquiries into his habits and fortune. Finding that this devoted servant literally had nothing but his situation, Napoleon recognized him as one of the incorruptible natures which raised the character of his government and gave moral weight to it, and he wished to surprise him by the gift of some distinguished reward. But the effort to complete a certain work, involving immense labor, before the departure of the Emperor for Spain caused the death of the devoted servant, who was seized with an inflammatory fever. When the Emperor, who remained in Paris for a few days after his return to prepare for the campaign of 1809, was told of Bridau's death he said: "There are men who can never be replaced." Struck by the spectacle of a devotion which could receive none of the brilliant recognitions that reward a soldier, the Emperor resolved to create an order to requite civil services, just as he had already created the Legion of honor to reward the military. The impression he received from the death of Bridau led him to plan the order of the Reunion. He had not time, however, to mature this aristocratic scheme, the recollection of which is now so completely effaced that many of my readers may ask what were its insignia: the order was worn with a blue ribbon. The Emperor called it the Reunion, under the idea of uniting the order of the Golden Fleece of Spain with the order of the Golden

Fleece of Austria. "Providence," said a Prussian diplomatist, "took care to frustrate the profanation."

After Bridau's death the Emperor inquired into the circumstances of his widow. Her two sons each received a scholarship in the Imperial Lyceum, and the Emperor paid the whole costs of their education from his privy purse. He gave Madame Bridau a pension of four thousand francs, intending, no doubt, to advance the fortune of her sons in future years.

From the time of her marriage to the death of her husband, Agathe had held no communication with Issoudun. She lost her mother just as she was on the point of giving birth to her youngest son, and when her father, who, as she well knew, loved her little, died, the coronation of the Emperor was at hand, and that event gave Bridau so much additional work that she was unwilling to leave him. Her brother, Jean-Jacques Rouget, had not written to her since she left Issoudun. Though grieved by the tacit repudiation of her family, Agathe had come to think seldom of those who never thought of her. Once a year she received a letter from her godmother, Madame Hochon, to whom she replied with commonplaces, paying no heed to the advice which that pious and excellent woman gave to her, disguised in cautious words.

Some time before the death of Doctor Rouget, Madame Hochon had written to her goddaughter warning her that she would get nothing from her father's estate unless she gave a power of attorney to Monsieur Hochon. Agathe was very reluctant to harass her brother. Whether it were that Bridau thought the spoliation of his wife in accordance with the laws and customs of Berry, or that, high-minded as he was, he shared the magnanimity of his wife, certain it is that he would not listen to Roguin, his notary, who advised him to take advantage of his ministerial position to contest the deeds by which the father had deprived the daughter of her legitimate inheritance. Husband and wife thus tacitly sanctioned what was done at Issoudun. Nevertheless, Roguin had forced Bridau to reflect upon the future interests of his wife which were

thus compromised. He saw that if he died before her, Agathe would be left without property, and this led him to look into his own affairs. He found that between 1793 and 1805 his wife and he had been obliged to use nearly thirty thousand of the fifty thousand francs in cash which old Rouget had given to his daughter at the time of her marriage. He at once invested the remaining twenty thousand in the public funds, then quoted at forty, and from this source Agathe received about two thousand francs a year. As a widow, Madame Bridau could live suitably on an income of six thousand francs. With provincial good sense, she thought of changing her residence, dismissing the footman, and keeping no servant except a cook; but her intimate friend, Madame Descoings, who insisted on being considered her aunt, sold her own establishment and came to live with Agathe, turning the study of the late Bridau into her bedroom.

The two widows clubbed their revenues, and so were in possession of a joint income of twelve thousand francs a year. This seems a very simple and natural proceeding. But nothing in life is more deserving of attention than the things that are called natural; we are on our guard against the unnatural and extraordinary. For this reason, you will find men of experience—lawyers, judges, doctors, and priests—attaching immense importance to simple matters; and they are often thought over-scrupulous. But the serpent amid flowers is one of the finest myths that antiquity has bequeathed for the guidance of our lives. How often we hear fools, trying to excuse themselves in their own eyes or in the eyes of others, exclaiming, "It was all so natural that any one would have been taken in."

In 1809, Madame Descoings, who never told her age, was sixty-five. In her heyday she had been popularly called a beauty, and was now one of those rare women whom time respects. She owed to her excellent constitution the privilege of preserving her good looks, which, however, would not bear close examination. She was of medium height, plump, and fresh, with fine shoulders and a rather rosy complexion. Her blond hair, bordering on chestnut, showed, in spite of her husband's catastrophe, not a tinge of gray. She loved good cheer, and liked to concoct nice little made dishes;

yet, fond as she was of eating, she also adored the theatre and cherished a vice which she wrapped in impenetrable mystery—she bought into lotteries. Can that be the abyss of which mythology warns us under the fable of the Danaïdes and their cask? Madame Descoings, like other women who are lucky enough to keep young for many years, spend rather too much upon her dress; but aside from these trifling defects she was the pleasantest of women to live with. Of every one's opinion, never opposing anybody, her kindly and communicative gaiety gave pleasure to all. She had, moreover, a Parisian quality which charmed the retired clerks and elderly merchants of her circle,—she could take and give a jest. If she did not marry a third time it was no doubt the fault of the times. During the wars of the Empire, marrying men found rich and handsome girls too easily to trouble themselves about women of sixty.

Madame Descoings, always anxious to cheer Madame Bridau, often took the latter to the theatre, or to drive; prepared excellent little dinners for her delectation, and even tried to marry her to her own son by her first husband, Bixiou. Alas! to do this, she was forced to reveal a terrible secret, carefully kept by her, by her late husband, and by her notary. The young and beautiful Madame Descoings, who passed for thirty-six years old, had a son who was thirty-five, named Bixiou, already a widower, a major in the Twenty-Fourth Infantry, who subsequently perished at Lutzen, leaving behind him an only son. Madame Descoings, who only saw her grandson secretly, gave out that he was the son of the first wife of her first husband. The revelation was partly a prudential act; for this grandson was being educated with Madame Bridau's sons at the Imperial Lyceum, where he had a half-scholarship. The lad, who was clever and shrewd at school, soon after made himself a great reputation as draughtsman and designer, and also as a wit.

Agathe, who lived only for her children, declined to re-marry, as much from good sense as from fidelity to her husband. But it is easier for a woman to be a good wife than to be a good mother. A widow has two tasks before her, whose duties clash: she is a



mother, and yet she must exercise parental authority. Few women are firm enough to understand and practise this double duty. Thus it happened that Agathe, notwithstanding her many virtues, was the innocent cause of great unhappiness. In the first place, through her lack of intelligence and the blind confidence to which such noble natures are prone, Agathe fell a victim to Madame Descoings, who brought a terrible misfortune on the family. That worthy soul was nursing up a combination of three numbers called a "trey" in a lottery, and lotteries give no credit to their customers. As manager of the joint household, she was able to pay up her stakes with the money intended for their current expenses, and she went deeper and deeper into debt, with the hope of ultimately enriching her grandson Bixiou, her dear Agathe, and the little Bridaus. When the debts amounted to ten thousand francs, she increased her stakes, trusting that her favorite trey, which had not turned up in nine years, would come at last, and fill to overflowing the abysmal deficit.

From that moment the debt rolled up rapidly. When it reached twenty thousand francs, Madame Descoings lost her head, still failing to win the trey. She tried to mortgage her own property to pay her niece, but Roguin, who was her notary, showed her the impossibility of carrying out that honorable intention. The late Doctor Rouget had laid hold of the property of the brother-in-law after the grocer's execution, and had, as it were, disinherited Madame Descoings by securing to her a life-interest on the property of his own son, Jean-Jacques Rouget. No money-lender would think of advancing twenty thousand francs to a woman sixty-six years of age, on an annuity of about four thousand, at a period when ten per cent could easily be got for an investment. So one morning Madame Descoings fell at the feet of her niece, and with sobs confessed the state of things. Madame Bridau did not reproach her; she sent away the footman and cook, sold all but the bare necessities of her furniture, sold also three-fourths of her government funds, paid off the debts, and bade farewell to her *appartement*.

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