

# THE BELLS.

A Romantic Story.

FROM THE FRENCH OF

MM. ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN.

## CHAPTER XII.

### THE BURGOMASTER'S DREAM.

The wedding guests had left the house. Their voices died away in the distance. One by one the household retired to rest, and gradually, by imperceptible degrees, unbroken stillness settled upon the whilom scene of so much jollity.

The burgomaster slept. Was it a good and gentle sleep? Did it refresh the weary brain, brace up again the unstrung nerve? See how he strives to move in the bed! Why cannot you move, Mathias, why cannot you move! What terrible weight weighs upon your body, to us invisible! Is it the archfiend himself, in the hideous form the monks of the middle ages clad him in so many years ago, that to us in Alsace it seems he could not exist in any other!

He sits on your breast, Mathias; he sits on your breast. How heavy! how heavy! Look at the great black wings stretching into illimitable space! How awful they look! And the eyes! how they glare, while a lurid, sulphurous glow partly illumines the thick, choking, murky air around them.

Ha! he turns and points! Don't look, Mathias, don't look! What, you must! Then try to groan, struggle hard to cry out! Will it! will it! Conquer the spell that holds you bound! One sound will do it—but one—but one! What! you cannot utter it! Woe to you, Mathias, that you cannot. Summon all your strength to bear the sight. It is terrible beyond expression, beyond endurance.

What do you see, Mathias?

I see a great hall, dimly lighted, its walls so dark and gloomy, I can but guess at where they stand. Gradually it becomes lighter, lighter, lighter. I can distinguish figures now. It is a full court. There must be some great cases on, for the public have flocked from far and near. There sits the president, with his two assistant judges, all three in full robes of state. Beneath them, ranged around, are advocates, clothed in deep and sombre black, and the clerk, who reads out in a drawing monotone the act of accusation. I cannot distinguish what he says, so I turn to look at the public. Who is on trial, I wonder! The accused must be well known. I see many of my own friends among the spectators. There is Father Trinkvelt. How anxious he looks. And old Dr. Glauter. What a stern, solemn face he wears. I see Monsieur Swartz, the notary, too. He tries to speak to the prisoner, but a gendarme forbids him.

What is that lying on the table before the judges? A cloak, trimmed with sable, and a fur cap! The cloak is green; they look like—Great Heaven! 'tis the case of the Polish Jew they are hearing. That man is on trial for his life. Stay, stay! He is innocent! I know it! Who so well? It was—

And Mathias strove to move in his bed.

Hush! hush! Mathias,—listen, listen,—so much the better for you if he is condemned,—so much the better for you. They will never hang another for the same deed; justice will be appeased then,—let the innocent suffer, why need you care? Look after yourself, look after yourself. For years the villagers have reproached you for sheltering those Jokels, and it was a silly thing to do,—do not you interfere again; let justice take her course and have her fill.

See, there is the prisoner seated in the dock. Strange, he shrinks away from the cloak with a shiver. One end of it lapped over the table and touched him as he passed. Why should he shrink? One would almost say he was guilty,—but you know better, don't you, Mathias?

Hush! don't talk now, but listen,—the clerk has begun to speak more plainly. I can catch now at intervals such words as the twenty-fourth day of December—a Polish Jew—Baruch Koweski—profound cunning—public respect and consideration—prisoner shielded for fifteen years—justice blind, but unerring—a trivial circumstance—the brothers Jokel.

Ah, it must be one of them. There sits the prisoner. He looks taller and stronger than either of the Jokels. We shall soon know who he is; he throws back the hood he has worn. In the dim, uncertain light of the court-room I cannot distinguish his features. The moon breaks through a cloud and shines in at the window full on the prisoner's face. Ah, Great God it is I!—I, Mathias, the burgomaster of Lauterbach! But, oh, God how changed! My cheeks are sunken and haggard, my eyes hollow and wild. No doubt I have been in prison for some time; my dress is ragged, and foul with dung-on filth; my lips colourless, my hair quite grey. What will they do to me, I wonder! I am safe. They have no proof. I took care of that!—I took care of that! Hush, the president speaks. Let us hear what he has to say.

Prisoner, you have heard the act of accusation read, you have heard the depositions of the wit-

nesses as well, we are ready now to listen to your defence.

I start up; "witnesses," I cry fiercely, do you call such people witnesses? people who were leagues away at the time the blow was struck, people who saw nothing. The deed committed too at night, and in the depth of winter; and yet you call such people witnesses.

You are right, Mathias, I think to myself, there were no witnesses. Defy them, brave them all, they can prove nothing against you.

The president continues, Answer with calmness, this fury cannot but harm you; you are a man full of cunning.

No, president, I am a simple-minded peasant. Do not tell me that, prisoner,—you took your measures too well for a simple peasant; you chose the opportune moment, cleverly evaded all suspicion, destroyed all material evidence. Prisoner, you are a man to be feared.

Because nothing can be proved against me, I am a man to be feared; then why not fear every honest man? Tell me this, who is my accuser?

The public voice accuses you.

Oh, the public voice! Listen, president, and you too, your honours, judges of the court, when a man prospers in life, and raises himself high above the position in which he was born, he is sure to make secret enemies. Thousands envy him the prosperity he has attained,—you know this is true, I am sure it is so in your own case. It is a thing that happens every day; well, unfortunately for me, for fifteen years I have gone on prospering, gaining consideration and esteem and wealth, and making hundreds of hidden foes as well. They envy me the good fortune for which I have worked. They would gladly see me fall; they come out now and attack me in my misfortune, because, cowards as they are, they think I cannot return their blows. But you, you are just men, you are men full of good sense, will you listen to envious wretches such as these? Will you not rather force them to be silent. I feel sure, I know you will.

You speak well, prisoner; for years past you have turned over in your mind what to say should you ever be accused. But we are not to be fooled by your mock humility; we see what is passing within you,—tell me this, why is it you hear continually the sound of bells?

I do not hear the sound of bells.

And Mathias upon his bed strove again to move.

'Tis false, prisoner, at this very moment you hear that sound. Why is it? whence comes it? It is nothing,—it is but the blood that rushes to my head.

I am right, I think to myself, I heard the noise just before I had that terrible stroke on Christmas Eve. It will pass away soon.

If you do not confess whence this noise arises, we will summon the mesmerist to explain it. It's true, then, it's true,—I do hear this noise.

Write, clerk, that he confesses it.

Yes, but I hear it in my dreams.

Write that he hears it in his dreams.

I suppose that an honest man may dream?

Of course,—whispers old Swartz to his neighbour, Father Trinkvelt,—Mathias is right; dreams come in spite of oneself.

Yes, yes, every one has had dreams.

Don't fear for me, friends, don't fear for me. I am in no danger. All this is but a dream,—you don't know it, but I do. If it were not a dream, would the moon be shining in at the window? Men are not judged by moonlight. Should I be before such judges as these? Judges who, acting on their own mad fancies, would hang me,—yes, hang me!—me, the Burgomaster of Lauterbach, and the most respected man in the province. Oh, it's all a dream,—a dream,—a dream,—and I burst out into a loud laugh.

Silence, prisoner, cries the president severely, you are approaching the judgment seat of God, do not dare to laugh. Then turning to his colleagues, he continues: Gentlemen, this sound comes from the prisoner's memory. Memories make up the life of man. We hear the voices of those we have loved long after they are dead. The prisoner hears this sound, because he has a remembrance that he would hide from us. The Jew's horse carried bells.

'Tis false; I have no memories,—I remember nothing.

Be silent.

I will not be silent,—a man's life cannot be judged away on mere empty superstitions like these,—you must have proof, proof, I tell you. I hear no noise of bells.

Write that the prisoner contradicts himself. First he confessed to hearing the sound, now he retracts his confession.

No, I hear nothing.

I put my hands to my ears to strive to shut out the hideous noise. It grows louder and louder. How they jangle and jangle, harsh and discordant around me. It is but the blood,

though, rushing to my head. It is but the blood. It is but the blood.

How awful is this dream! When shall I wake from it? When shall I wake? Great God, perhaps it is not a dream; perhaps it is all real, or may be so, when I awake. But I will not wake. I will sleep—sleep for ever. Ah! the fiend glares at me, and laughs a hideous, creaking, chuckling laugh. He says I shall not sleep. He strives to wake me. I struggle with him. I get weaker and weaker, but I conquer. I do not wake—I sleep on—I sleep on.

Mathias's hand fell from the bed and hung down by the side.

Where is Fritz, my son-in-law? Why is he not here? I look around to every side, but cannot find him. Send for him—send for him; he'll prove that I'm an honest man. Send for him—send for him, I say!

Ah, thank God, the bells have ceased. I shall not hear them again—I shall not hear them again.

Do you persist in your denial, prisoner?

I do. It is gross injustice to keep me here in prison on mere suspicion. I am a martyr in the cause of justice.

You persist?

I do.

Then hear us. We, Rudiger, Baron of Mersebach, Prefect for His Imperial Majesty in Lower Alsace, assisted by our coadjutors, Masters Louis Falkenstein and de Feininger, doctors in ecclesiastical and civil law, considering that this affair took place some fifteen years ago, and that it is impossible to throw light upon it by ordinary means, firstly, through the prudence, cunning, and boldness of the prisoner; secondly, through the death of witnesses who could have given weighty evidence, and materially assisted us in discharging this important duty, to which the honour of our tribunal is pledged; considering also that this trial is destined to serve as a warning to future generations, as a curb to avarice, and a terrible example to cruelty and cunning, we decree that the court hear the mesmerist. Usher, admit the mesmerist.

I oppose it! I oppose it! The mesmerist can but make me dream, and dreams prove nothing.

Summon the mesmerist!

'Tis abominable! 'Tis in defiance of all the rules of justice.

Prisoner, if you are innocent, why fear the mesmerist? Because he can read the very souls of men? Calm yourself, or believe me your cries, your terror itself, will prove your guilt.

What shall I do? How fortunate that they cannot hear me think! I know that mesmerist. I dare not face him. I will get an advocate to speak for me. He will find some quibble, some legal excuse.

I demand an advocate. I wish to instruct the advocate Linder, of Saverne. He is a good man. It will cost me much, but in such a case as this, what do I care for cost? As for my excitement, who would not be excited? I am as calm as I can be. As calm as a man can be who has nothing on his conscience. But dreams are dreams. I cannot help dreaming. Why is Fritz not here? My honour is his honour. Send for him! Bring him here! He is an honest man, and you know it! He will prove that I am one as well! Fritz! Fritz! Fritz! I have made you rich! Come and defend me.

Again the sleeping Mathias strove to move.

How came that fellow there, that mesmerist? I did not see him enter. He speaks. What does he say?

Your honours, the president and judges of the court, by your decree I am here. Without it, terror would have kept me aloof from your august presence.

Who can believe in the follies of the mesmerist? Why, they only cheat people in order to get money from them. The merest mountebank in the street is as clever as they. This fellow I know well. Why, it was he whom I saw at my cousin's at Ribeauville.

Can you send this man to sleep?

I can.

He glares at me. I glare in return. We fight with our eyes. Ugh! I cannot bear his scorching gaze.

I'll not be made the subject of this imposter's experiments. Send for Fritz! Why is he not here? He'll prove to you that I, Mathias, the burgomaster, am as honest a man as ever lived.

Wretch, by your resistance you are betraying yourself.

Oh, I have no fear! How I hurl the words in his face. Then to myself I add, courage, Mathias, courage. If you sleep you are lost! Courage! Courage! No, I'll not sleep! I feel his hands forcing down my eyelids. I'll not sleep—I'll not—I'll not—I'll not!

Mathias slumbered still soundly in his bed.

"He sleeps," says the mesmerist, "what shall I ask him?"

"Ask him what he did on the night of the twenty-fourth of December, fifteen years ago."

"You are at the night of the twenty-fourth of December, 1818."

"Yes"

"What time is it?"

"Half-past eleven."

"Speak on, I command you."

"The guests have left the inn. Martha has taken little Margaret to bed. Our man Casper

comes home—he tells me that he has lit the limekiln fire. I answer—very good—you can go to bed—I'll watch the kiln to-night. He goes off to his room. I am left alone with the Jew, who is warming himself by the stove. Without, all is at rest. Not a sound is heard, save when the Jew's horse, tethered under the shed near the kitchen door, from time to time shakes his bells. There are two feet of snow upon the ground, Mathias."

"What are you thinking of?"

"I am thinking that I must have money. That if I cannot get together three thousand francs before St. Sylvester's Eve, I shall be turned out of the inn on the morrow. I am thinking that there is no one near—that the night is dark as pitch—that the Jew will drive along the high road quite alone, in the snow."

"Are you determined to attack him?"

"Let me think first. That man is strong. His shoulders are broad. I believe he would defend himself well should any one attack him—"

"Why do you turn away?"

"He looks at me. I cannot bear his gaze. He has grey eyes. Shall I do it? Yes—yes!"

"You have decided?"

"Yes,—yes,—I'll do it—I'll risk it."

"Speak on."

"Wait. I must look round first. I go out. The night is black overhead. The snow is falling fast! Ha, ha! It will hide my footsteps."

"What are you doing?"

"I am searching the sledge, to see if the Jew has any pistols. No, no,—there's nothing—nothing at all—I can risk it. The village is as silent as a graveyard. Our little Margaret is crying. There is no fire in our room, and the poor child is cold. No matter, she shall not be cold to-morrow."

"You re-enter?"

"Yes. He has put six francs down on the table. I give him his change. He looks at me again."

"Does he speak to you?"

"Yes. He asks how far Murtzig is from here. About four leagues. I wish him well on his journey. He answers, 'God bless you.'—Ah!"

"What is it?"

"See—the girdle! He goes out. He is gone. Where's the axe? I cannot find it. It should be here. Where is it? Ah, here it is, behind the door,—ugh! How cold it is! The snow is falling still—not a star—not a star. So much the better. Courage, Mathias, courage! Before another hour has passed the girdle will be yours."

"You follow him?"

"Yes."

"Where are you now?"

"Behind the village—in the fields—how cold it is!"

"You have taken the path across the fields?"

"Yes. It saves that great round by Michael's farm. I have crossed the first field. I can already see the bridge, and there beneath it lies the brook, a mass of solid ice. How the dogs howl over at Daniel's farm—how they howl! And old Finck's forge, how red it glows upon the hill-side! Kill a man, Mathias! Kill a man! You'll not do that—you'll not do that. Heaven forbid it!"

"I turn to run home again—then stop and think. You're a fool, Mathias, listen, think how rich you'll be, how you'll be able to pay all you owe, how the bailiff Ott may come on New Year's Day, and how you can snap your fingers at him—how your wife and little Margaret need no longer want for anything. The Jew came. It was not your fault. He had no right to come. You must kill him! You must kill him!"

"I take up the axe again that I had thrown down, and run on. The bridge, the bridge, I have reached it already. I listen. No one on the road? No one! You are warm, Mathias, warm with running. Your heart beats. Listen, the church clock at Waechem tolls out the hour. It's one o'clock. One? One? Why then—then the Jew is passed—he's gone—oh, God be praised! God be praised! Hush! Don't you hear the bells! He's coming. He's coming. Be careful, Mathias. Don't dabble your sleeves in the blood! Roll them up tight! Roll them up tight! Remember—the girdle—the girdle—you'll be—rich—rich—rich—rich. Ah! ah! I have done it! I've done it!"

"What was that? Nothing—only the horse has fled in affright with the sledge. He is motionless. He is dead. It's all over. Another noise! Nothing again. Only the wind whistling through the trees. Quick, quick, let me get the girdle at once—the girdle at once—the girdle at once. Ha! I've got it! I am panting for breath! I can scarcely buckle it round my waist! Nothing but gold in it! Nothing but gold! Nothing but gold! Quick, Mathias, no giving way now. Rouse yourself. Carry him away. Carry him away!"

"Where are you going?"

"To the limekiln."

"Have you reached it?"

"Yes. I throw my burden down. How heavy he was! Oh, what hands are here! Dabbled with his blood! I'll have no more of that. Where's the shovel? I'll push him in with that. Go into the fire, Jew, go into the fire!"

"Now, be quick! Empty the girdle. Put the gold into your pockets. That's right. Now throw the girdle into the kiln. Look, look, but be careful to shade your face or the fire will scorch you; look, look, look, he is burning, he is burning, burning. The corpse turns on the