

# THE BELLS.

A Romantic Story.

FROM THE FRENCH OF

MM. ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN.

## CHAPTER IX.

### SIGNING THE CONTRACT.

In the midst of the merriment, Martha and Margaret re-entered the apartment, just back from church. Martha was full of business. She had sent for the notary, who was in the next room reading the contract to the hastily-assembled guests. Mathias signified his approval by a silent nod, and then relapsed into thought. Meanwhile, Margaret and Fritz stood hand-in-hand, apart from the old folks, off in a quiet corner together.

"What a beautiful cap, Ma'mzelle Margaret," whispered the quartermaster, admiringly; "and how it becomes you!"

"It was my dear father who brought it me from Ribeauville."

Martha caught the whispered words. "Yes," she exclaimed, "Mathias is a father worth having." And, in the homely fulness of her joy, she stroked her husband's listless face—some-what incautiously, as it would seem by the cry that suddenly escaped her.

"What's the matter?" cried Margaret and Fritz in a breath.

"Oh, nothing," replied the mother, laughing, "it was only Mathias bristles that scratched my poor old hands, hard as they are."

"You see, cried Mathias, merrily, whilst all were laughing at Martha's sudden access of extreme sensibility, "I am too happy to-day to think about shaving."

The voice was merry, the laugh cheery and clear; but—it died away into silence. No one resumed the thread of the broken conversation. Martha sat thinking. Mathias stood apart, silent and thoughtful. The lovers alone conversed eagerly—eagerly; but it was in a mute and silent language.

The stillness became almost painful. At length Mathias dispelled it.

"Well, quartermaster," cried he, laying his hand affectionately on the young man's shoulder. "Well, quartermaster, this is the great day, is it not?"

"It is, Burgomaster," rejoined the young man, his eyes still fixed upon Margaret.

"Well, don't you know what is customary when father and mother and all consent? Why, you embrace your betrothed." And, taking his daughter's hand, he placed it again in Fritz's, looking at them both the while, so touchingly, so lovingly,—ah, Burgomaster, that look is a better dowry than your bag of gold. There is no soil there! No spot to wash out that can never be effaced! All's gold there, pure and unalloyed. The love of a father for his two children, stronger now than when there was but one.

"Is that true, Margaret?" whispered Fritz softly.

"I don't know, Fritz."

But the yielding of the maiden gave another answer, and well could the quartermaster read it. Respectfully, almost timidly, he pressed his lips to her forehead and folded her in his arms. It was the happiest moment of their lives.

"Look at our children, Martha, how happy they are! When I think that we, too, were once as happy, how strange it seems! It's true, yes, it's true we were once as happy." And the soft, tender tones returned to the burgomaster's voice, until he seemed not to be speaking, but rather playing some instrument of wondrous melody.

Martha wept silently.

"Why, you are crying, Martha! Are you sorry to see our children happy?"

"No, no, Mathias, these are tears of joy, and I can't help them." And the burgomaster and his wife were joined in a long loving embrace.

"And now to sign the contract," cried Mathias heartily, and, striding to the door, he summoned his friends and neighbours to enter the apartment.

"Trinkvelt! Kobel!" he cried, "come in! Let every one present come in. The most important acts in life should always take place in the presence of witnesses. Such was our fathers' custom, the old and honest custom of Alsace."

Upon the word, a joyous strain burst from the village band, which had hastily assembled to do honour to the magistrate; and, to the music, friends and neighbours, rich and poor, young and old, all smiling and happy and gay in holiday garb, poured into the apartment. First marched little Kobel, strutting about with all the grand magnificence of a cock with two hens. In fact, the funny old man had a village beauty on each arm,—Jeanne, the kitchen-maid at the burgomaster's, and little Lois Rêb, whom some pretend is as pretty as Margaret Mathias herself; but that is mere envy, and most likely sprang from some disappointed swain. Here is Nickel, too, and old Casayer, who has been in the burgomaster's service these sixteen years. Then old mother Goltz and her great-grandchild Gredel followed, and with them poor blind Marie Wittelsbach, Margaret's dearest friend. Then all moved aside respectfully to admit Dr. Glauter himself, who entered alone, stately, majestic.

Then no more order was observed, but all came trooping in one after another, and last of all, and always late, came Bertha Schoenewald, in her yellow silk apron, the roses blooming on her cheeks and merry smiles dimpling her pretty round face, and showing such a set of lovely white teeth that, for my part, I think, I should have preferred her even to Fritz's bride, the acknowledged belle of the village. But then, those who are old enough to remember her when she was young, all agree that she was the very image of what her daughter Bertha Schwanthaler is now, which, perhaps, accounts for my partiality.

Did I say Bertha came last? I was wrong; for once, she did not. I had forgotten no less a person than good Monsieur Swartz, the notary, who entered, portfolio in hand, and bowed to right and left, as he made his way to the table and seated himself in the burgomaster's own arm chair; then clearing his throat, he began to read, in a full and impressive voice, the marriage contract. When he had concluded, he added:—

"My friends and witnesses, I have just read you the contract of marriage between Monsieur Fritz Bernard, quartermaster of gendarmes, and Margaret Mathias, daughter of Hans Mathias, our good and honoured burgomaster, and of his no less honoured wife, Madame Martha. Has any one any observations to make? If you desire it, I will read the contract again."

"No, no," cried several voices at once; "don't trouble yourself, Monsieur Swartz."

"Then we can at once take the signatures." And the notary gravely rose and handed the pen to the magistrate of the village.

Mathias took it, but put it down on the table.

"One moment, Monsieur Swartz," said he; "I have a few words to say. Fritz, pray listen to me. From this day I look upon you as my son, and give into your care the future happiness of my darling daughter, Margaret. You know that our children are the dearest treasures we possess on earth, or at least, if you do not know it yet, the day is not far distant when you will. You will know that in them is all our joy, all our hope, all our life. That nothing that can serve them is painful to us,—neither toil, nor fatigue, nor privations; at times, not even sin itself. To them we sacrifice all things; and our greatest miseries are as nothing weighed against the misery of seeing them unhappy. You can understand then, Fritz, how great is my confidence in you, and how much I esteem you, when to you I am willing to entrust the happiness of the only child I have, not without fear, but even with joy. Many rich suitors presented themselves, and had I looked for nothing but fortune, I might have accepted them. But far above fortune I place courage, probity, and honour, which so many affect to despise. These are the true riches which our forefathers esteemed before us, and which I prize high above all. By patience and perseverance one may amass much money; by miserly saving and hoarding one may acquire too much. One can never have too much honour; therefore, I rejected those who brought me nothing but wealth, and I take into my family a man who has nothing but his courage, his good conduct, and his good heart. I choose Fritz Bernard because I know he is an honest man, and because I feel he will make my dear child happy!"

"And now," cried Mathias, "let us sign."

"One moment, Monsieur Mathias," interrupted the notary, "let me, in my turn, say a few words." Then turning to the assembled guests, the old man continued, "The words that you have just heard are good words, my friends,—words of wisdom, words of truth. They show us plainly the whole character of our burgomaster. I have assisted at many marriages in my life, but always have I seen houses married to acres, orchards to meadows, and pieces of silver to pieces of gold. But to have a hand in marrying fortune to honour, industry, and fair fame, that is what I like; and, believe me, for I have some experience of the ways of this world, believe me when I say that this marriage will be a good marriage and a happy marriage. I am sorry to say such unions are not heard of so often now as they used to be."

And the old man took a mighty pinch of snuff; then turning to the burgomaster, he added, "Monsieur Mathias, I would like to shake hands with you. You have spoken well!"

"I said what I meant," replied Mathias, cordially shaking the old man's hand. "And now to business," he added, and turning to the desk he drew forth his bag of gold.

"Not a piece stained," murmured he; "not a piece, not a piece." Then placing the bag on the table before the notary, he continued aloud, "There, Monsieur Swartz, there is the dowry. It has been ready for the last two years. It is not in promises, made on paper; no, it is in gold. Three thousand crowns in good French gold!"

A murmur of admiration ran round the assembly.

"It is too much, burgomaster!" expostulated the bridegroom.

"Nonsense, Fritz, nonsense. When Martha and myself are gone, there'll be more, there'll be more." Then abandoning the grave solemn tone in which he had been speaking for one lighter and freer, but equally impressive, he continued, "And now, Fritz, I want you to make me one promise."

"What promise, Monsieur Mathias?" asked the quartermaster, rather surprised.

"Young men are ambitious; it's quite natural they should be. Now, no doubt, an active, energetic young fellow like yourself will not have long to wait for advancement. The prefect may, in a year or so, name you lieutenant in some other village of the department; should he do so, you must promise me to remember that Margaret is our only child—that we cannot live without her. You must promise me to remain in this village as long as Martha and myself are still alive. Do you promise that?"

Did Fritz hesitate long? No. What was ambition compared to love, compared to the duty of striving to clear off the heavy debt of gratitude he owed the burgomaster! Whatever lingering longings he might have entertained were soon dispelled. Margaret's wistful look decided him.

"I do promise," he cried.

"Then I have your word of honour, given before all!"

"Yes, my word of honour given before all."

A hearty shake of hand clinched the bargain, while exclamations of joy burst sympathetically from all around. Mathias only turned aside and murmured, "Twas necessary." His voice seemed then to grow cheery again, and turning to the notary, he cried merrily, "now for the contract!"

The deed lay stretched before him. The pen was in his hand, his fingers touched the paper. Why did he pause? Whence the sudden paleness that spread like a ghastly winding-sheet over his features? Why did he whisper to himself, "The bells—the bells again!" and then, with a sudden and supreme effort, dig his name into the paper? Why half dash the pen upon the table, then suddenly pause and lay it carefully down, with a furtive glance around, as if fearing that all eyes were upon him? Why then turn away, wipe the cold sweat from his fevered brow, and drink eagerly the glass of water beside him, as though his throat were parched?

No one noticed him, however. All eyes were bent on Fritz, who advanced to sign the document. Father Trinkvelt caught the young man by the sleeve. "It isn't every day you sign such a contract as that?" Why did Mathias start and turn fiercely upon the old forester, and then join so freely in the merry laugh that greeted the old man's jest? Whether with reason or without, he did so, for Mathias was ill at ease to-day.

Martha had made her cross on the paper, and Margaret had scrawled her name just below, in characters as big and ungainly as she herself was fair and winsome. The contract was signed, and the wedding might begin as soon as the parties pleased.

"And now, just one waltz," cried Mathias, "and then to dinner!"

"Yes, yes," re-echoed from twenty merry lads and lasses at once; and Bertha Schoenewald jumped about and clapped her hands with delight at the prospect of a dance.

"Stop, stop!" cried Father Trinkvelt; "first we must have the song of the betrothal. On a day like this we can't do without it. Come, Margaret, sing it for us."

No foolish mock modesty hindered our little maid. All voices joining in the request, Margaret at once consented. Immediately the room was cleared for the waltz, while the village musicians tuned up their fiddles, and began to scrape out the old air peculiar to the village, that is known in all the country round,—yes, and across the Rhine too, as the air of Lauterback. Margaret sang:

Suitors of wealth and high degree,  
In style superbly grand,  
Tendered their love on bended knee,  
And sought to win my hand;

But a soldier brave came to woo;  
No maid such love could spurn;  
Proving his heart was fond and true,  
Wou my heart in return.

How dull and stupid the words look on paper! How melting sweet they rang as they issued from her pretty lips. After each verse, the boys and girls jodelled the chorus, then dashed off at once into a round of the waltz. What happiness reigned in the whole assembly! How tenderly Fritz clasped his pretty partner in the dance; how confidently did she yield herself to his embrace. There, in the corner, Kobel and Jeanne are twirling in the true Alsatian fashion, with their hands on each other's shoulders. Bertha Schoenewald is dancing in the opposite corner with young Tony Schwanthaler; now old Tony Schwanthaler, who doesn't look half such a sour cross curmudgeon as he seems to be, when of a Sunday afternoon, I dance with his daughter on the green, and he sits in the arbor smoking and quaffing his schoppen, and ever and anon nudging young Ferrus to go and make love to her. Ugh, I hate that old man—at least—I don't hate him quite. He is her father, and that makes a difference. Now his face wears a merry, jolly look. In fact, every one is merry. The musicians eager to the music as they play. Old Mousieur Swartz and Dr. Glauter are eagerly

chatting away, and rattling their snuff-boxes, unconsciously beating time to the air. Only Mathias is silent. The last verse has been sung, the chorus is over, and the dance in good earnest commenced. Mathias starts. "Bells, bells; bells again!" He murmurs, and glares round to see if it be a trick practiced upon him. Of those innocent faces none is open to suspicion. They dance and dance, and louder and louder the bells jangle and jangle, until a perfect storm of sound seems to howl around. "Ring on, ring on!" howls out he in return; and snatching Martha from old Trinkvelt, round and round he whirls her in the giddy waltz, frantically yelling, "Ring on, ring on; I defy you!"

## PART THIRD.

### THE BELLS ARE SILENCED.

#### CHAPTER X.

##### THE LOVERS' TALK.

The bells were drowned in the shouts and merry laughter of the guests. The music ceased at last, and tired out with the waltz, and with an appetite sharpened by exertion, the burgomaster's friends made the best of their way to the *Gaststube* to partake of the burgomaster's dinner. And it was a dinner! How on earth Madame Mathias had managed to make so fine a spread on so short a notice, was what Bertha Schoenewald never could understand. But then Bertha Schoenewald had the reputation of never understanding anything. Any one but Bertha would have known that Martha was not a woman to be taken by surprise. What a splendid meal she had provided! There, in front of Mathias, was a great boar's head, flanked by a splendid haunch of venison, which Kobel had especially undertaken to provide,—and good it was too, just hung to a nicety. On the opposite side of the table, for in Alsace our host and hostess sit in the centre, and are not selfishly stuck off in state at the two ends, miles apart from each other; on the other side, I say, in front of Madame Mathias, were two beautiful sucking pigs, stuffed with some delicious herbs that gave them a rare and tempting flavour. Then at the top of the table, where Father Trinkvelt presided, what a mountain of beef was that that reared itself aloft there, and almost completely obscured the old man from our sight, while between it and the Westphalian hams that guarded the other end of the board, were scattered roast fowls, Strasburg pies, odoriferous omelettes, broiled fish, and beautiful plump brown sausages rolling in oceans of gravy.

And the wine! What Rikevir! What Huen- evir! Ay, and sparkling white wine too, all the way from that precious field, the Clôs Vougeot, on the other side of the Vosges. Nor was this all. There were better wines nearer home that had not been forgotten. Even Dr. Glauter and Kobel, the most exacting connoisseurs in all the country round, declared themselves surprised and delighted. Assuredly the burgomaster had not been to Ribeauville for nothing.

For awhile after the dinner had been consumed the guests sat still drinking. Then the room was cleared for the waltz, and fresh bottles brought in. The musicians were ready, nought was wanting but the bride and bridegroom to open the ball. Where were they? Who had seen Margaret and Fritz slip away so unfairly? No one. After shouting in vain for the delinquents, the dancers were fain to begin without them. Were they not lovers? And had they not a right to go off and hide in a corner alone, to have a quiet chat as together? So Margaret and Fritz thought as they sat, hand-in-hand, cosily ensconced behind the great stove in the kitchen. Ever and anon some one came to the door and summoned them, but received no answer, and soon, in the general revelry, the causes of all the mirth were forgotten.

"Is it true, Margaret," whispered Fritz, "that we are to be married to-morrow—quite true?"

"I think so, Fritz," murmured she, in return. "Are you sorry to hear it?"

"Sorry? How can you ask that, Margaret?" No, no; I can scarcely trust my own senses. I can scarcely believe so much happiness can really be mine. As long as I live, Margaret, I shall remember the first time I saw you. It was in the beginning of last spring—not a year ago. What an age it seems! You were standing in front of the fountain, amid the other girls of the village, laughing and chatting merrily with them. I was just riding back with old Riber from Wasselonne, whither we had been with despatches,—how plainly I can see you now, with your pretty little petticoat tucked up, your white arms and your red cheeks. You turned your head, and saw me riding down the road."

"Yes," said Margaret, dreamily, "it was two days after Easter. I remember it well."

"Remember it! Why, not a day has passed since then. It was yesterday it all happened. I turned to Riber and asked, carelessly, 'Who is that pretty girl, Father Riber?' 'Why, quartermaster, that is Ma'mzelle Mathias, the daughter of the burgomaster, the richest and prettiest girl in the department.' At once, I thought to myself: 'No, no, Fritz, she is not for you, my good fellow—not for you, in spite of your five campaigns, and the two wounds that scar your breast! And from that moment I could not help thinking again and again, 'How lucky some people are in this world! They never risk their lives fighting for their country, and yet they get the best of everything for the