

**THE DUCK NOVELS.
THE BELLS. A
ROMANTIC STORY**

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The Duck Novels. The Bells. A Romantic Story by Erckmann-Chatrrian

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A Romantic Story.

FROM THE FRENCH OF

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THE BELLS.

PART FIRST.

Christmas Eve.

CHAPTER I.

"THE KINGS OF COLOGNE."

It was Christmas Eve. The fires burned bright in every stove in Alsace. Such a winter had not been known for years. In fact, the weather was so fierce without that no one cared to face it, so that for once the shades of night fell on the little village of Lauterbach without filling the *Gaststube* of the 'Kings of Cologne,' the principal inn of the place, and the first you come to in the main street as you drive from Ribeauville to Saverne. So Madame

Martha, the wife of the innkeeper,—and of the burgomaster too, for Mathias was both,—sat quietly spinning in one corner, trying to drown with the whizzing burr of her wheel the howling of the storm without. A great fire roared in the iron stove in the corner, and its reflection illumined the snow-lined panes of the window, glanced off to the polished panels of the oaken floor, lit up with a lurid glow the copper face of the great clock that ticked slowly in the corner, and finally, unwarily entering the door that stood so hospitably open just before it, was lost in the depths of Jeanne's kitchen. All day long had the gleams from the fire been pursuing this same unvaried round, so that by nine in the evening, for such was the hour by the clock near the door, a very genial glow had gradually pervaded the room, and raised the temperature to that point which sensible people should score on their thermometers as comfort mark. In fact, nothing seemed wanting in the room to make it a pleasant abiding spot; and yet Madame Mathias was ill at ease, and turned with an air of such welcome to old Kobel, the forester, as he entered, as one would have thought the blast of cold air and burst of flaky snow that forced their way in with him would alone have chilled and prevented.

“More snow, Madame Martha, more snow, and

nothing but it!" cried old Kobel, as he began vigorously to clear his boots of the powdery element. He still stood on the door-mat, so as not to soil the waxed and polished floor, and give the thrifty housewife double trouble.

"So you are still at the village, Kobel?"

"Why, yes, Madame Mathias," replied the forester, stamping vigorously on the mat to rid himself of the last vestiges of the storm before venturing further into the apartment, "why, yes, Madame Mathias. You see, it's Christmas Eve, and one can allow oneself a little extra enjoyment."

"Your sack of flour is quite ready for you at the mill."

"So it may be," giggled the old fellow, "but I'm not ready for it. No, I'm not in a hurry," and the old fellow giggled again, and fumbled at the buckles of his long boots as he stood warming himself at the stove. Kobel was a jolly little old man, with a red, grinning face, a funny little turned-up nose, and bright twinkling little eyes; a head of what had been light brown hair, but was now fast becoming iron grey, and a fierce grizzly moustache, twisted up at the ends *a la militaire*. Kobel had turned out nineteen years ago at the invasion, and done his duty like a man at the defence of Pfalzburg. Of this episode he was rather proud, and considered himself,