

**THE STEEL
HAMMER: A NOVEL**

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The Steel Hammer: A Novel by Louis Ulbach

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LOUIS ULBACH

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THE
STEEL HAMMER

A NOVEL

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BY

LOUIS ULBACH
AUTHOR OF "MADAME GOSSELIN," ETC.

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

By E. W. LATIMER

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THE STEEL HAMMER.

CHAPTER I.

THE OVERTURE.

ABOUT twenty-years ago, the three clerks in the office of Maître Boisselot, a notary in one of the suburbs of Paris, were making the most of the temporary absence of the head of the firm to tell all sorts of stories about him, and to confide to one another all their love-affairs.

They were interrupted at the most interesting moment—the very moment when each young Don Juan, incited by emulation, vanity, or a love of drawing the long-bow, was about to reveal the name of the lady who was to be his future conquest—by a knock at the office-door.

A young man with an intelligent face, pallid, however, from overwork, sickness, or anxiety, and with restless, anxious eyes, presented himself with a letter in his hand, and, in a pleasant voice, though somewhat out of breath, asked humbly if Maître Boisselot was in.

“No!” replied the youngest of the three clerks, somewhat roughly.

He was provoked at having lost the opportunity of informing his elders how much notice Madame Boisselot was disposed to take of him; and, besides, he belonged by birth, instinct, and vocation to that class of French employés—very numerous in our day—which was never intended to serve the public, but for whom the public is a natural prey.

It will be understood why, after this, I abstain from telling exactly what suburban district Maître Boisselot set up his conjugal

establishment, and flaunted the imperial arms over his office-door.

The reader is at liberty to locate him where he pleases, provided he chooses some place not far from Paris and on the bank of the Seine—Saint-Cloud, for instance, Suresnes, Puteaux, Neuilly, Courbevoie, or Asnières, to which places, however, I would not wish to limit his suppositions.

"Will he be in soon?" asked the visitor, whom the little clerk had snapped at so fiercely.

The head clerk, who in the absence of the chief took his place in the office, and whose dignity forbade him to bark and snap at strangers, said, with an assumption of importance:

"Have you come to speak to Maître Boisselot about business, or is it only that you wish to see him?"

"I have received this letter, and have come as soon as I could. Am I too late?"

As he said this, somewhat timidly, he put out his hand toward the desk with the letter. The chief clerk snatched it at once, and, glancing over it, said:

"Ah! then you are Monsieur Jean Mortier?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"You have come about the money left by Monsieur Mortier-Fondard? No, you are not too late. On the contrary, the letter names four o'clock, and it is only three. Besides, even if Monsieur Boisselot were in, he could do nothing without the presence of Monsieur Pierre Mortier."

"Ah!" said Jean Mortier, with a half-sigh, turning a little paler than before, "is my cousin summoned, too?"

The chief clerk smiled.

"Of course. Are you not both in the same degree heirs of the deceased?"

Jean Mortier, in his turn, had a gleam in his eye, sudden and flickering, and a smile came to his lips when the clerk uttered the word *heirs*.

"I will come back again," he said, softly.

"Oh! no; you can wait," said the chief clerk, with a sigh of resignation.

"I am afraid I shall disturb you," said Jean Mortier."

This time the clerks made him no answer. He had made his remark out of pure politeness, having no idea of departing because

he had arrived before his cousin. He thought, indeed, it was a piece of luck. Fortune might work some miracle in the will, in order to reward the one of the two heirs who had been most eager to court her good graces.

He took a chair. He carried it into one corner of the office, and, to disarm both the hostility of the clerks and avert any evil influences that might chance to be hovering around the place where reposed the written testament, he sat down noiselessly, turned his head away from the three young men, and set to work to study the backs of the bundles of law-papers arranged on shelves around the office, above the stand for the portfolios, and the pictures of the chief officials of the department.

Did he realize that those dusty archives, each packet of which was ticketed with its own date, were the glory of all law-offices; that false ones are sometimes exhibited when the office is not so fortunate as to be possessed of many old ones; and that these yellow papers are intentionally never dusted, like wine-bottles at a wine-merchant's that are engarlanded with cobwebs, or the big empty bottles with mysterious tickets, and the pots of fancy salves, which are the unfailing ornaments of all druggists' establishment?

He looked as if he were admiring them. Most likely he did not even see them. At the end of five minutes his eyes seemed fixed on one particular bundle of papers, but his thoughts were far away; they were rushing after the notary, after the cousin he expected; he was half wild with impatience, though he sat so still. Some drops of sweat, which he dared not wipe from his forehead, attested his anxiety. From time to time he opened his mouth to give passage to a sigh, which he arrested before it passed his lips; and one of his hands, which held his cap, a cloth cap such as is worn by artisans, kept smoothing it slowly, rolling it up, squeezing it together, and then suddenly it would be stretched out with a gesture of utter weariness and despair.

Jean looked like a man who was half a workman, an artisan who has set up for himself.

His jacket of brown cloth was almost a coat. His cravat and his shoes were those of a tradesman who goes round to houses to take orders. But his apron of green stuff, which showed under his jacket, and his upholsterer's hammer, with its long handle, which stuck half out of the front pocket of the apron, showed that he was a fellow who "looked after his own business," as they say in the

counting-room. Jean did put his own hand to his work, and he had just broken off some that he was eager in doing, to come as fast as possible on the summons of the notary.

He was tall, thin, and well made, with a quantity of black hair thrown back from his face, and displaying a high, broad forehead, but his look also indicated either a confirmed habit, or the affectation of a habit, of indulging in sad, passionate, and feverish thoughts—the kind of thoughts which make a man pass his hands through his hair nervously. He had expressive eyes, dreamy yet resolute; a small, well-formed mouth, a mustache as black as his hair, and shapely hands—manifestly the kind of hands to plait up stuffs, and possibly to model in plaster. Jean Mortier needed only to unfasten his green apron, and to change his hammer for a sheaf of painters' brushes or a sculptor's tool, to have passed for an artist anywhere.

The clerks made believe to be very busy. But the youngest made too much noise with his pen to be writing, and the one above him did not make enough. He had a pencil in his hand, and looked up at Jean Mortier more often than he would have done had he not been busy with a sketch of him, or rather a caricature.

As for monsieur, the chief clerk, he was visibly writing with rapidity and attention—only it was not on office-paper, and it was more likely to her whose client he was than to any client of his master, Maître Boisselot.

Jean Mortier had been waiting about twenty minutes when the door of the office was again opened.

"Is Monsieur Boisselot in?" asked a rough voice, the voice of a peasant. He was dressed in a coarse cloth jacket, with heavy shoes upon his feet, and a hat with a broad brim, which he did not remove till he felt himself firmly balanced on two legs that were by nature somewhat bandy.

His face was red, with no particular expression, and a good deal furrowed. It was that of a cattle-breeder or a horse-dealer. It was easy to see that he was a man accustomed to attend markets, and to settle his transactions at the *cabaret*. He walked up to the big desk, that had two fronts to it, on which the clerks were leaning, much as if he were in a drinking-place and going up to the counter. A sharp-cornered shirt-collar of coarse linen, showed that he had brushed up his toilet for the occasion. The collar kept rubbing against his whiskers, which were cut round below his cheek-bones. His waistcoat was of black velveteen, with metal buttons. He had

taken it out of his closet for this visit, but it was so short in the waist that it was with difficulty dragged down to meet the waistband of his trousers. These trousers were of corduroy, and every time he moved the shirt peeped out, like a line of white foam, between the two disjointed parts of his habiliments.

"Maître Boisselot is out," replied the chief clerk, who then put the same question he had before put to Jean Mortier.

"All right," he said, when it was answered, "you can wait with this other gentleman, who is here on the same business."

The peasant turned quickly, frowned, and then cried out, with an air of forced gayety:

"*Tiens!* Is that you cousin?"

"How are you, Pierre?"

"Better than you are, I should think, for you look as sallow as a Parisian. . . . *Ah, ça!* Have they sent for you, too?"

"Yes. It seems that our uncle's will concerns both of us."

Jean said this with rather a troubled voice. Pierre began to laugh, but very probably his laugh was not quite genuine.

"I fancied I was going to be the only one concerned," he said. "But, never mind, the pile is big enough for both of us."

"Ah! you think——"

"Uncle had at least a hundred thousand francs of one kind and another."

"A hundred thousand francs!" repeated Jean, with his lips trembling; and a bright light came into his eyes which betrayed or rather increased his anxiety and suffering.

"Yes; so that, if the will divides it between us——"

"Divides it!" exclaimed Jean, with a sigh.

Pierre misinterpreted the sigh.

He suddenly seized a chair, sat down close to his cousin, and, tapping him on the knee with a familiarity as little sincere as his late laugh, said:

"Do you happen to know anything about it, cousin?"

"No; I know nothing except that I was ordered to come here to-day."

The peasant turned toward the clerks.

"And you, gentlemen," he said, "have you any idea what your employer is going to tell us?"

The clerks, whose fun had been broken in upon, but who were all ready for anything else in that line, grinned at one another.

This impatience on the part of an heir was nothing new to them, but it always diverted them.

"Maitre Boisselot is not in the habit of telling us things before the papers have to be drawn out," replied the one in authority.

"All right. We'll wait."

After a short silence, Pierre began in an insinuating tone :

"*Ah! ça*, cousin, it's a long time since we saw each other. That's the way in families. If there were no funerals, no marriages, and no wills, one never would meet; and even now Uncle Matthieu—unsociable old rascal!—died and was buried without letting us know. And you too, Jean, never asked us to your wedding."

"I felt sure you would not come."

"Well! perhaps not. *Ah! ça*, are you a happy pair?"

"A happy pair, . . . yes."

"Have you any children?"

"One little girl, three years old."

"No more than that? And business—how does that get on?"

"Ah! business!"

Jean raised his eyes to the ceiling.

Pierre saw at once part of the secret of his cousin's paleness, and by an impulse that was not ill-natured, but simply the exuberance of a lucky man who is sensible of his own advantages, he slapped his breeches pockets, saying :

"Well! I am satisfied. Since the Empire came in, cattle have been high. Fodder is plenty. But a little farm like mine costs a great deal. One has to be stirring, and then fertilizers are so dear. The more people invent, the more money it takes to keep up with their inventions. People will end by rotting bank-notes into the soil. I tell you frankly that, if uncle has left me my share, he has done me a big service!"

"Did you see him often?" asked Jean.

Pierre, who had taken off his round hat and put it between his legs, ruffled up his hair with a wave of his hand :

"Yes," he said, "I went to see him sometimes."

He emphasized the word *sometimes*, with an air of importance.

"I never went," said the upholsterer.

"It was unlucky," the peasant could not refrain from saying, with a swelling of his breast that seemed like sorrow, "that I did not go and see him the week he died. But there was a fair at Provins—a cattle-fair. I could not miss it. I was greatly vexed when I came