

THE THIRTEENTH CHIME.

A Legend of Old London.

BY ANGUS B. REACH.

It was in one of the earliest years of the reign of Henry the Eighth, and on a glorious summer's day, that two men sat in earnest conversation together in the oak-panelled parlour of a small house abutting upon St. Paul's Churchyard. The one was a soldier, the other a priest. The former was habited as an officer of the yeomen of the guard—his morion surmounted by a plume of feathers lay before him on the table, and his rich scarlet and gold uniform shone gay and glistening in the sunshine. He was a young man, but vice and unbridled passion were stamped, like Cain's mark, upon his face. His eyes were bloodshot; his mouth coarse and sensual, and his whole bearing fierce and swaggering. His priestly companion had thrown back his cowl, probably for coolness, and disclosed features, the expression of which, like that of the captain of the guards, was evil, but which, unlike his, was partly redeemed by an appearance of lofty intellectuality. The priest's forehead was high and massive, and his eye deep set and bright. As he glanced at his companion, his thin, pale lip curled involuntarily, and the scorn of his smile was withering. But the soldier perceived it not, as he carelessly set aside the silver stowp from which he had been imbibing plentiful draughts of sack, and remarked—

"And so, Bully Friar! thou hast absolved all my sins—truly their name was legion—but that boots not now; they are rubbed away like rust, from a sword blade."

"Doubtless thou art pardoned. Have I not said it?" returned the priest. And as he spoke his lip curled more palpably than ever.

"That swaggerer, pinned by the cross-bow bolt at Thame?" said he of the yeoman of the guard, beginning anew the muster roll of his transgressions—

"Think not of it," replied the priest.

"And the murder done at the Bankside?"

"Forgiven."

"And the despoiling of the Abingdon mercer?"

"I have absolved."

"And the vow broken to Sir Hildebrand Grey?"

"It will not count against thee."

"And the carrying off of the pretty Mistress Marjory?"

"Has been atoned for."

"And oaths, lies, imprecations innumerable?" rejoined the captain. "Not so much that I care about such petty matters; but when one is at confession, one may as well make a clean breast of it."

"In the name of the church I absolve thee. And now, Captain Wyckhamme, thou must perform a service for me."

"It is but reasonable. Thou art my helper in spiritual—I am thine in matters earthly! We serve each other, Father Francis."

The worthy Father Francis smiled. It is possible that he deemed the arrangement a better one for himself than for his military friend.

"Therefore say the word," continued Wyckhamme, "and, lo! my bountiful forgiver of transgressions, I am thine for good or evil."

Father Francis bent his keen black eye steadily upon his companion—gazing as if he would peer into his soul. At length he spoke, slowly and calmly—

"Thou hast a yeoman in thy company of guards—one Mark Huntley."

"Marry, yes. A fine, stalwart fellow; he draws a bow like Robin Hood; and I would ill like to abide the brunt of his partisan. What of him?"

The priest started up—his eye flashed—his nostril dilated, catching Wyckhamme's arm, with his brown, sinewy hand and clutching it convulsively, he said, hoarsely—"Ruin him!"

"Ruin him!" repeated the officer of the guards, somewhat surprised at this unexpected outburst. "Ruin him! Marry, man, bethink ye; he is the flower of my company."

"I say, ruin him," cried the priest. "Thou art his officer, and there are a thousand ways. Plot—plot—so that he may rot in a dungeon, or swing from a gallows. He is a canker in my heart."

"But wherefore art thou set against the yeoman, Father?" asked Captain Wyckhamme.

"He has crossed my path," said the priest, moodily.

"Crossed thy path—how?" demanded the soldier.

Father Francis looked wistfully at the questioner, and muttered—"In love."

Captain Wyckhamme struck the table with his fist, until the wine flasks danced again, and then, starting to his feet, with a coarse roar of laughter, exclaimed—"Ho, ho! hath it come to this? And so a neat ankle and buxom cheeks and a gimp waist were more than a match for thy sanctity! and thy cell was solitary and cold—was it not, priest? And a man, even though a monk, cannot be always praying, and so thou wouldst take to wooing for an interlude. Brave sir priest! Credit me thou art a man of mettle—a bold Friar—an honor to thine order. Nay thou shalt be the founder of an order—of a family, I mean, and by my halldame, there will be a rare spice of the devil in the breed. But I say, Father, who is she? Do her eyes sparkle? Her cheeks glow—her—"

"Silence, babbler," said the priest, "her name is too pure a thing for thee to take within thy lips; for thee to speak of her—mere blasphemy."

"Ha!" exclaimed Wyckhamme, "priest, I say unto thee beware."

"Hush! I love her, love her with a depth of passion which things like thee cannot feel or comprehend. I have wrestled—fought with it—striven in the darkness and silence of my cell to crush it, but I cannot; she is my light—my air—my life—my idol. I have said it—I have sworn it—she shall be mine, although I give body and soul to purchase the treasure!"

The captain looked surprised at this outbreak. "Wilt thou remove this man?" continued the priest after a pause, and speaking in a voice of frightful calmness.

"Hum—why—marry I would do much to oblige thee," began the soldier—when his companion interrupted him.

"We are in each other's secrets," he said.

The officer of the guard shrugged up his shoulders still higher.

"Art thou resolved?" inquired Father Francis quietly.

"I am," was the reply; "Mark Huntley will not long live to thwart thee."

"Tis well," muttered the priest—"but the blow must be immediate."

"It shall fall to-morrow," said Wyckhamme; "leave the means to me. But I say, Father, how dost thou propose to get possession of the maiden, and when?"

"To-night," replied the monk and his eye glistened, "I am her father confessor."

Captain Wyckhamme smacked his lips. "A sweet duty, by my faith, to listen to the fluttering thoughts of youthful female hearts: I almost would I were a monk."

"Curses on thy licentious tongue," exclaimed the churchman in a voice of suppressed passion. "Listen—I have imposed on her a midnight solitary penance. At the dead hour of the night she is to kneel before the shrine of the Virgin in the cathedral. I shall be there."

"And attempt to carry her off?" she will scream."

"There are gags."

"She will fly."

"There are bonds, and secret keeping places the world wots not of, at my disposal—while Mark Huntley—"

"Is my part of the job. Priest, it is a well laid scheme—I think it may prosper."

"It must," answered the priest; "but the sun hath past the meridian, is it not time thou wert on thy way homeward?"

"Marry, you say true," exclaimed the other, "and I will plot my share in the matter as I ride."

"Do so," said the priest, "and farewell."

In five minutes Captain Wyckhamme, attended by two yeomen of his troop, was spurring down Ludgate Hill, on his way westward—while Father Francis, enveloped in his cowl, paced slowly and thoughtfully back to the cathedral. The people made way for him reverently and bowed low; the father had the reputation of being rich in the odor of sanctity, and many counted themselves happy in his "Benedicite."

The hours passed away and it became night—a fair, calm, summer's night, in which the moon and stars seemed striving to outshine each other. A deep hush was upon London. The last of the crew of 'prentices, who had been whiling away the lengthened twilight by a noisy game of football in

Cheape, had been summoned within doors by his vigilant master, and the streets were left to the occasional home-returning reveller, who either paced along with tipsy gravity, or made the old houses ring with snatches of the drinking songs which still buzzed in his ears. The stately mass of old Paul's rose majestically above all humbler tenelements, steeped in a flood of moonshine—its quaint carvings and sculptured pinnacles here standing out clear and palpable in the starry air, and there broken by broad masses of deep black shadow.

It was near the hour of midnight when the light figure of a woman, closely muffled in its draperies, glided cautiously and timidly along the quiet pavement, and tripped up the steps toward one of the side entrances of the cathedral. The door of a chapel, from which admittance might be had into the main portion of the building was open. As she crossed the threshold, the damp chill of the air, so different from the genial atmosphere without, made her pause. It was but for a moment and then she entered the cathedral.

It was an awfully solemn place. No work of men's hands could be more grand, its shadowy vastness seemed not of the earth. The eye could only dimly trace its proportions by the gorgeously colored light admitted by the painted glass and imagination supplied the rest. Here were the vast clustered pillars, the echoing aisles, the groined and arched magnificence of the roof, and over all a silence like the silence of the dead; the intruder crossed her arms upon her bosom, for the place was chill, and the next moment Mabel Lorne knelt before the shrine of the Virgin. She had hardly passed a minute in devotion when a heavy hand was laid upon her shoulder; with a fluttering heart she started to her feet, and beheld the face of Father Francis dimly seen close to hers.

"Father!" she exclaimed.

"Daughter," returned the priest, in a voice trembling with passionate eagerness, for he thought he had his victim in his clutch, "thou must go with me," and at the same instant, before she could make a motion to prevent him, he slipped a kerchief prepared for the purpose over the lower part of her face, and she was unable to utter a sound.

"Come, sweet one, come!" said Father Francis, in a low, tremulous voice, as he attempted to seize her arm and waist. Surprise and despair, however, gave Mabel strength,—making a frantic effort, she freed herself from the rude grasp, and fled. Uttering a muttered imprecation, the priest pursued, but his flowing robes hindered his progress; with a reeling head and almost insensible of what she did, Mabel flew over the pavement; she tried to make for the door, but her confusion was too great to enable her to discover it,—she heard the footsteps of the priest close to her, and fled unwitting whither she went.

"Ha! now I have thee," panted the monk, as the fugitive appeared driven into a corner of the building, and he made a plunge forward to grasp her. He was disappointed. A low-browed door stood open in the wall leading to the spiral stone staircase, and up it she flew like the wind. As Mabel put her foot upon the first step—a loud clang rang through the cathedral—it was the first chime of twelve struck by the great clock. Up—up—up went pursuer and pursued. Fear gave unnatural swiftness to Mabel, and she rushed upwards—round and round the spiral staircase, as though her feet felt not the stone steps.

The priest was close behind—with clenched teeth and glaring eyes; maddened by passion and disappointment, he made desperate efforts to overtake his victim, and sometimes Mabel heard his loud pantings close behind her. Up they went, higher and higher; the gyrations of the stairs seemed endless, and all the while the clock rang slowly out the iron chimes of midnight. The place was dark, but there was nothing to impede one's progress; and here and there bars of white moonlight, shining through loopholes, chequered the gloom. Up! up! higher and faster—but Mabel felt that her limbs were failing her—she made one more effort—one frantic bound, and lo! she saw above her in a space on which the moonbeams fell, the complicated works of the great clock. She had no breath to raise an alarm which could be heard by those below. She listened to the rapidly mounting footsteps of the priest, and her heart sank within her.

Just then the great iron hammer which struck the hours, rang the last stroke of twelve upon the bell. A thought darted like lightning through Mabel's brain, she might make that iron tongue speak for her. Gliding through the machinery, she mounted among its framework, and grasping the hammer with both hands, she strained every nerve and muscle of her white arm, and slowly raising the ponderous weight, let it fall upon the bell, and lo! with a clang which rung through her very brain—THE THIRTEENTH CHIME fell upon the sleeping city. Breathlessly was the priest preparing to seize her when the iron peal for a moment arrested his hand. He looked up—there stood the gentle creature amid the still throbbing mechanism—her white hands convulsively clasping the iron, and her face distorted with terror and fatigue. The moonlight showed him all this, and showed him, moreover, the hammer again moving under the maiden's grasp. The danger of his position immediately flashed across him,—he knew that there were many within the chapels and cells attached to the cathedral, sleepless watchers of the hours—and he feared that the unusual number of chimes would attract immediate attention. Muttering a deep curse, he turned and Mabel heard him hurrying down the staircase. Cautiously she followed, and on reaching the bottom, heard his voice communicating with a brother monk.

"I am certain," said the latter, "that the clock struck thirteen."

"So I deemed, Brother Peter," replied the low tones of the monk; "and I have come forth to inquire how it could be so."

Cautiously keeping in the shadow, Mabel glided past the speakers; she saw the door opposite her, and flew towards it. As she ran, Father Francis caught a glimpse of her retreating form, and made a wild gesture of rage and disappointment. The next moment Mabel was in the open air, and was soon locked and bolted in her own little room. Sinking on the floor she cried bitterly, and then rising, she said, "I have no friends here—with the first blush of morning I will procure a good palfrey, and fare forth to Windsor. Mark must know all."

A bright breezy morning had succeeded the fair calm night, and the sun was yet low in the horizon, when Mabel Lorne, mounted on a spirited palfrey, left behind her the western outskirts of London, and pushed merrily on through green fields and hedges in the direction of Windsor. Soberly disquieted as she had been by the events of the past night, the jocund influence of the fresh breath of morning, and the merry sunshine, the rapid motion through a fair country, and, above all, the thought of meeting her lover, made Mabel's cheeks bloom, and her eyes sparkle. She caressed the glancing neck of the bounding animal which carried her, and the palfrey answered the touch of its mistress by a loud and joyful neigh, and pressed merrily and speedily onward; and away they went amid leafy hedgerows sparkling with dewdrops and fields of rich rustling corn; and by clumps of gnarled old trees, and jungles of sprouting saplings; and antique, red brick-built old farm houses; and manorial halls, embosomed in ancestral trees; and the peaceful walls of distant monasteries. And the smoke was beginning to rise from men's dwellings, in long spiral columns, into the clear morning air; and laboring people were already afield; and now and then, the fair traveller caught a glimpse of the broad river, with green trees bending over its waters, and sedges upon its banks, and swans floating upon its bosom. Everything looked calm, and bright, and happy. Mabel's eye wandered over the grand panorama of hill, and dale, and brake, and coppice, stretching out in all their green loveliness before her: and as the massive towers of Windsor Castle rose over the rich expanse, her heart was so full and yet so light, that she felt as if she could raise her voice and sing as merrily as the birds among the branches.

She would not, however, have so much enjoyed her ride, if she had known who was pressing in hot haste after her. Father Francis, very much discomfited by the bad success of his attempt, and not being altogether easy about the consequences, had watched the maiden more closely than she was aware of, and on her setting out for Windsor—he had ascertained her

destination, through a groom—determined, though he hardly knew for what purpose, to follow the fugitive. Suddenly recollecting, therefore, some ecclesiastical business to be settled with the prior of a monastery near Datchet, the priest provided himself with a pacing mule,—an animal generally used by the churchmen of the period, and the better breeds of which were little inferior in point of speed and endurance to the horse—and was speedily ambling briskly on the great western road. He saw the fair country around as though he saw it not, and only looked eagerly ahead at every turn of the road, expecting momentarily to see the fair fugitive. But he was disappointed—Mabel's palfrey carried her well, and when she drew rein at one of the postern gates of the castle, the priest was still a good mile beyond.

A yeoman of the guard was standing sentinel at the little nail-studded wicket, leaning upon his partisan, and whistling melodiously. To him she addressed herself:—

"You have a comrade named Mark Huntley," she said; "fair sir, I would speak with him."

The soldier looked at her with some interest, stopped his whistling, and said hastily, "Are you Mabel Lorne, fair mistress?"

"That is my name," said Mabel, blushing.

"Then, by St. George, I am sorry for thee," returned he of the partisan. "Mark Huntley was a good fellow and a true—and—"

"Was!" shrieked Mabel—"was! He is not dead?"

"Almost as good," replied the sentinel; "his captain hath accused him of sleeping on his watch, and that thou knowest is death—death without redemption."

Mabel sank upon the ground. The burly yeoman cursed his own bluntness in blurring out at once the bad news. "But she'll soon have another mate," he muttered, as he stooped over and endeavored to revive her; "by my sword hilt she is fair enough for the bride of a belted earl, let alone a poor yeoman."

"Bring me to him—bring me to him, for pity's sake," faltered Mabel.

"Nay, that may hardly be, pretty one," said the soldier. "He is under watch and ward; and by St. George, I think it be near the time when he will be brought before the king."

"Let me at least see him," exclaimed Mabel; "perchance, soldier, there is some maiden who loves thee as I do him, and who will one day plead on her bended knees for one last look at the man for whom her heart is breaking!"

"I will see what can be done," said the honest yeoman.

He was as good as his word—for summoning some of his comrades, with whom Mark Huntley had been a general favorite, he spoke apart to them; and in a few minutes Mabel found herself smuggled into a lofty arched hall, with deep gothic moulded windows, and furnished with ponderous oaken settles. Her friends, the yeomen, kept her in the midst of their group, enjoining upon her the necessity of preserving a perfect silence. Hardly had she looked around her, and noted a large unoccupied chair covered with crimson cloth, upon the dais at the upper end of the hall, when a priest, closely cowed, glided in, and took his station in a corner of the place. She saw not his face, but she felt that the priest was Father Francis. All at once the groups of officers and knights, who were sauntering, gossiping, and laughing through the hall, became silent, and placed themselves around the unoccupied chair—there was a moment's pause, and a portly man, with a broad, stern face, decorated with a peaked beard, walked into the hall. His doublet was richly adorned, and at his belt he carried a short poniard.

This was King Henry VIII.

Throwing himself carelessly in the chair prepared for him, he said in a deep stern voice, "Bring forth the prisoner, and let his accuser likewise appear."

There was a short bustle—a heavy door creaked upon its hinges, and Mabel's heart swelled within her, and her limbs trembled, as she saw Mark Huntley, bound, led before the king. But a second partly look reassured her. His cheek was pale, but there was in the firmness of his step, and the proud glance of his eye, the mighty strength of conscious innocence. Opposite to him stood Captain Wyckhamme—his