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FLUNG A SNOWBALL AT ME. *Page 11.*

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THE SNOWBALL

BY

STANLEY J. WEYMAN

AUTHOR OF "A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE," "UNDER
THE RED ROBE," "MY LADY ROTH,"
ETC. ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

[Flung a snowball at me.](#) *Frontispiece.*

[He dropped his napkin.](#)

["Your scribe might do for me."](#)

[She sprang forward.](#)

[It was the king.](#)

["Are you coming out there?"](#)

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THE SNOWBALL.

The slight indisposition from which the Queen suffered in the spring of 1602, and which was occasioned by a cold caught during her lying-in, by diverting the King's attention from matters of State, had the effect of doubling the burden cast on my shoulders. Though the main threads of M. de Biron's conspiracy were in our hands as early as the month of November of the preceding year, and steps had been immediately taken to sound the chief associates by summoning them to court, an interval necessarily followed during which we had everything to fear; and this not only from the despair of the guilty, but from the timidity of the innocent who, in a court filled with cabals and rumors of intrigues, might see no way to clear themselves. Even the shows and interludes which followed the Dauphin's birth, and made that Christmas remarkable, served only to amuse the idle; they could not disperse the cloud which hung over the Louvre, nor divert those who, on the one side or the other, had aught to fear.

In connection with this period of suspense I recall an episode, both characteristic in itself, and worthy, I think, by reason of its oddity, to be set down here; where it may serve for a preface to those more serious events, attending the trial and execution of M. de Biron, which I shall have presently to relate.

I had occasion, about the end of the month of January, to see M. du Hallot. The weather was cold, and partly for that reason, partly from a desire to keep my visit, which had to do with La Fin's disclosures, from the general eye, I chose to go on foot. For the same reason I took with me

only two armed servants, and a confidential page, the son of my friend Arnaud. M. du Hallot, who lived at this time in a house in the Faubourg St. Germain, not far from the College of France, detained me long, and when I rose to leave insisted that I should take his coach, as snow had begun to fall and already lay an inch deep in the streets. At first I was unwilling to do this, but reflecting that such small services are highly appreciated by those who render them, and attach men more surely and subtly than the greatest bribes, I finally consented, and, taking my place with some becoming expressions, bade young Arnaud find his way home on foot.

The coach had nearly reached the south end of the Pont au Change, when a number of youths ran by me, pelting one another with snowballs, and shouting so lustily that I was at a loss which to admire more--the silence of their feet or the loudness of their voices. Aware that lads of that age are small respecters of persons, I was not surprised to see two or three of them rush on to the bridge before us, and even continue their Parthian warfare under the very feet of the horses. The result was, however, that the latter presently took fright at that part of the bridge where the houses encroach most boldly on the roadway; and, but for the care of the running footman, who hastened to their heads, might have done some harm either to the coach or the passersby.

As it was, we were brought to a stop while one of the wheels was extricated from the kennel, into which it had become wedged. Smiling to think what the King--for he, strangely warned by Providence, was all his life long timid in a coach--would have said to this, I went to open the curtains, and had just effected this to a certain extent, when one of a crowd of idlers who stood on the raised pavement beside us deliberately lifted up his arm and flung a snowball at me.

The missile flew wide of its mark by an inch or two only. That I was amazed at such audacity goes without saying, but in my doubt of what it might be the prelude--for the breakdown of the coach in that narrow place, the haunt of the rufflers and vagrants of every kind, might be a part of a concerted plan--I fell back into my place. The coach, as it happened, moved on with a jerk at the same moment; and before I had well digested the matter, or had time to mark the demeanor of the crowd, we were clear of the bridge and rolling past the Chatelet.

A smaller man might have stopped to revenge, and to cook a sprat have passed all Paris through the net. But remembering my own youthful days, when I attended the College of Burgundy, I set down the freak to the insolence of some young student, and, shrugging my shoulders, dismissed it from my thoughts. An instant later, however, observing that the fragments of the snowball were melting on the seat by my side and wetting the cushion, I raised my hand to brush them away. In the act I saw, to my surprise, a piece of paper lying among the *debris*.

"Ho, ho!" said I to myself. "This is a strange snowball! I have heard that the apprentices put stones in theirs. But paper! Let me see what this means."

The morsel, though moistened by contact with the snow, remained intact. Unfolding it with the greatest care--for already I began to discern that here was something out of the common--I found written on the inner side, in a clear, clerkly hand, the words, "*Beware of Nicholas!*"

It will be remembered that Simon Nicholas was at this time secretary to the King, and so high in his favor as to be admitted to the knowledge of all but his most private affairs. Gay, and of a very jovial wit, he was able to commend himself to Henry by amusing him; while his years, for he was over sixty, seemed some warranty for his discretion, and at the same time gave younger sinners a feeling of superior worth, since they might repent and he had not. Often in contact with him, I had always found him equal to his duties, and though too fond of the table and of all the good things of this life, neither given to babbling nor boasting. In a word, one for whom I had more liking than respect.

A man in his position, however, possesses such stupendous opportunities for evil that, as I read the warning so cunningly conveyed to me, I sat aghast. His office gave him at all times that ready access to the King's person which is the aim of conspirators against the lives of sovereigns; and, short of this supreme treachery, he was master of secrets which Biron's associates would give all to gain. When I add that I knew Nicholas to be a man of extravagant habits and careless life, and one, moreover, who, if rumor did not wrong him, had lost much in that rearrangement of the finances which I had lately effected without even the King's privity, it will be seen that those words, "Beware of Nicholas," were calculated to occasion me the most profound thought.

Of the person who had conveyed the missive to me I had unfortunately seen nothing; though I believed him to be a man, and young. But the circumstances, which seemed to indicate the extreme need of secrecy, gave me a hint as to my own conduct. Accordingly, I smoothed my brow, and on the coach stopping at the Arsenal descended with my usual face of preoccupation.

At the foot of the staircase my *maître-d'hôtel* met me.

"M. Nicholas, the King's secretary, is here," he said. "He has been waiting your return an hour and more, Monseigneur."

"Lay another cover," I answered, repressing the surprise I could not but feel on hearing of this visit, so strangely *à propos*. "Doubtless he has come to dine with me."

Barely staying to take off my cloak, I went upstairs with an air as gay as possible, and, making

my visitor a hundred apologies for the inconvenience I had caused him, insisted he should sit down with me. This he was nothing loth to do; though, as presently appeared, his errand was only to submit to me some papers connected with the new tax of a penny in the shilling, which it was his duty to lay before me.

I scolded him gayly for the long period which had elapsed since his last visit, and succeeded so well in setting him at his ease that he presently began to rally me on my slackness; for I could touch nothing but a little game and a glass of water. Excusing myself as well as I could, I encouraged him to continue the attack; and certainly, if a good conscience waits on appetite, I had soon abundant evidence on his behalf. He grew merry and talkative, and, telling me some free tales, bore himself altogether so naturally that I had begun to deem my suspicions baseless, when a chance word gave me new grounds for entertaining them.

I was on the subject of my morning's employment. Knowing how easily confidence begets confidence, and that in his position the matter could not be long kept from him, I told him as a secret where I had been.

"I do not wish all the world to know, my friend," I said; "but you are a discreet man, and it will go no farther. I am just from Du Hallot's."



HE DROPPED HIS NAPKIN. *Page 20.*

HE DROPPED HIS NAPKIN. *Page 20.*

He dropped his napkin and stooped to pick it up again with a gesture so hasty that it caught my attention and led me to watch him. Moreover, although my words seemed to call for an answer, he did not speak until he had taken a deep draught of wine; and then he said only, "Indeed!" in a tone of such indifference as might at another time have deceived me, but now was perfectly patent.

"Yes," I replied, affecting to be engaged with my own plate (we were eating nuts). "Doubtless you will be able to guess on what subject."

"I?" he said, as quick to answer as he had before been slow. "No, I think not."

"La Fin," I said; "and his statements respecting M. de Biron's friends."

"Ah!" he replied, shrugging his shoulders. He had contrived to regain his composure, but I noticed that his hand shook, and I saw him put a nut into his mouth with so much salt upon it that he had no choice but to make a grimace. "They tell me he accuses everybody," he grumbled, his eyes on his plate. "Even the King is scarcely safe from him. But I have heard no particulars."

"They will be known by and by," I answered prudently. And after that I did not think it wise to speak farther, lest I should give more than I got; but as soon as he had finished, and we had washed our hands, I led him to the closet looking on the river, where I was in the habit of working with my secretaries. I sent them away and sat down with him to his accounts; but in the position in which I found myself, between suspicion and perplexity, I could so little command my attention that I gathered nothing from their items; and had I found another doing the King's service as negligently I had certainly sent him about his business. Nevertheless I made some show of auditing them, and had reached the last roll when something in the fairly written summary, which closed the account, caught my eye. I bent more closely over it, and presently making an occasion to carry the parchment into the next room, compared it with the handwriting on the scrap of paper I had found in the snowball. A brief scrutiny showed me that they were the work of the same person!



"YOUR SCRIBE MIGHT DO FOR ME." Page 23.

"YOUR SCRIBE MIGHT DO FOR ME." Page 23.

I went back to M. Nicholas, and after attesting the accounts, and making one or two notes, remarked in a careless way on the clearness of the hand. "I am badly in need of a fourth secretary," I added. "Your scribe might do for me."

It did not escape me that once again M. Nicholas looked uncomfortable, his red face taking a deeper tinge and his hand going nervously to his pointed gray beard, "I do not think he would do for you," he answered.

"What is his name?" I asked, purposely bending over the papers and avoiding his eyes.

"I have dismissed him," he rejoined curtly. "I do not know where he could now be found."

"That is a pity--he writes well," I answered, as if it were nothing but a whim that led me to pursue the subject. "And good clerks are scarce. What was his name?"

"Felix," he said reluctantly.

I had now all I wanted. Accordingly I spoke of another matter and shortly afterward Nicholas rose and went. But he left me in a fever of doubt and suspicion; so that for nearly half an hour I walked up and down the room, unable to decide whether I should treat the warning of the snowball with contempt, as the work of a discharged servant, or on that very account attach the more credit to it. By and by I remembered that the last sheet of the roll I had audited bore date the previous day; whence it was clear that Felix had been dismissed within the last twenty-four hours, and perhaps after the delivery of his note to me. Such a coincidence, which seemed no less pertinent than strange, opened a wide field for conjecture; and the possibility that Nicholas had really called on me to sound me and learn what I knew presently occurring to my mind, brought me to a final determination to seek out this Felix, and without the delay of an hour sift the matter to the bottom.

Doubtless I shall seem to some to have acted precipitately, and built much on small foundations. I answer that I had the life of the King my master to guard, and in that cause dared neglect no precaution, however trivial, nor any indication, however remote. Would that all my care and vigilance had longer sufficed to preserve for France the life of that great man! But God willed otherwise.

I sent word at once to La Font, my *valet-de-chambre*, the same who advised me at the time of my first marriage, to come to me; and directing him to make instant and secret inquiry where Felix, a clerk in the Chamber of Accounts, lodged, bade him report to me on my return from the Great Hall, where, it will be remembered, it was my custom to give audience after dinner to all who had business with me. As it happened, I was detained long that day, and found him awaiting me. Being a man of few words, he said, as soon as the door was shut, "At the 'Three Half Moons,' in the Faubourg St. Honoré, Monseigneur."

"That is near the Louvre," I answered. "Get me my cloak, and your own also; and bring your pistols. I am going for a walk. You will accompany me."

He was a good man, La Font, and devoted to my interests. "It will be night in half an hour,

Monseigneur," he answered respectfully. "You will take some of the Swiss?"

"In one word, no!" I rejoined. "We will go out by the stable entrance. In the mean time, and until we return, I will bid Maignan keep the door, and admit no one."

The crowd of those who daily left the Arsenal before nightfall happened to be augmented on this occasion by a troop of my clients from Mantes; tenants on the lands of Rosny, who had lingered after the hour of audience to see the courts and garden. By mingling with these we had no difficulty in passing out unobserved; nor, once in the streets, where a thaw had set in, that filled the kennel with water and the pavement with slush, was La Font long in bringing me to the house I sought. It stood on the outskirts of the St. Honoré Faubourg, in a quarter sufficiently respectable, and a street marked neither by extreme squalor nor extravagant ostentation--from one or other of which all desperate enterprises, in my opinion, take their rise. The house, which was high and narrow, presented only two windows to the street, but the staircase was sweet and clean, and it was impossible to cross the threshold without feeling a prepossession in Felix's favor. Already I began to think I had come on a fool's errand.

"Which floor?" I asked La Font.

"The highest. Monsieur," he answered.

I went up softly and he followed me. Under the tiles I found a door, and heard some one moving beyond it. Bidding La Font remain on guard outside, and come to my aid only if I called him, I knocked boldly. A gentle voice bade me enter, and I did so.

There was only one person in the room, a young woman with fair, waving hair, a pale face, and blue eyes, who, seeing a cloaked stranger instead of the friend or neighbor she anticipated, stared at me in the utmost wonder and some alarm. The room, though poorly furnished, was particularly neat and clean; which, taken with the woman's complexion, left me in no doubt as to her native province. On the floor near the fire stood a cradle; and in the window a cage with a singing bird completed the homely and pleasant aspect of this interior, which was such as, if I could, I would multiply by thousands in every town of France.

A small lamp, which the woman was in the act of lighting, enabled me to see those details, and also discovered me to her. I asked politely if I spoke to Madame Felix, the wife of M. Felix of the Chamber of Accounts.

"I am Madame Felix," she answered, advancing slowly toward me. "My husband is late. Do you come from him? It is not bad news, Monsieur?"

The tone of anxiety in which she uttered her last question, and the quickness with which she raised her lamp to scan my face, went to my heart, already softened by this young mother in her home. I hastened to answer that I had no bad news, and wished merely to see her husband on business connected with his employment.

"He is very late," she said, a shade of perplexity crossing her face. "I have never known him so late before. Monsieur is unfortunate."

I replied that with her leave I would wait; on which she very readily placed a stool for me, and sat down herself by the cradle, I ventured to remark that perhaps M. Nicholas had detained her husband: she answered simply that it might be so, but that she had never known it happen before.

"M. Felix has evening employment?" I asked after a moment's reflection.

She looked at me in some wonder. "No," she said. "He spends his evenings with me, Monsieur. It is not much, for he is at work all day."

I bowed, and was preparing another question, when the sound of footsteps ascending the stairs in haste reached my ears, and led me to pause. Madame heard the noise at the same moment and rose. "It is my husband," she said, looking toward the door with such a light in her eyes as betrayed the sweetheart lingering in the wife. "I was afraid--I do not know what I feared," she muttered to herself.



SHE SPRANG FORWARD. *Page 37.*

SHE SPRANG FORWARD. *Page 37.*

Proposing to myself the advantage of seeing Felix before he saw me, I pushed back my stool into the shadow, contriving to do this so discreetly that the young woman noticed nothing. A moment later it appeared I might have spared my pains; for at sight of her husband, a comely young man who came in with lack-lustre eye and drooping head, she sprang forward with a cry of dismay, and, utterly forgetting my presence, appealed to him to know what was the matter.

He threw himself on to a stool, the first he reached, and, leaning his elbows on the table in an attitude of extreme dejection, covered his face with his hands. "What is it?" he said in a hollow tone. "We are ruined, Margot. I have no more work. I am dismissed."

"Dismissed?" she ejaculated.

He nodded. "Nicholas discharged me this morning," he said, almost in a whisper. He dared not speak louder, for he could not command his voice.

"Why?" she asked gently, as she leant over him. "What had you done?"

"Nothing!" he answered with bitterness. "He said clerks were plentiful, and the King or I must starve."

Hitherto I had witnessed the scene in silence, a prey to emotions so various I will not attempt to describe them. But hearing the King's name thus prostituted and put to base uses, I started forward with a violence which in a moment made my presence known. Felix, confounded by the sight of a stranger at his elbow, rose hurriedly from his seat, and retreating before me with vivid alarm painted on his countenance, asked with a faltering tongue who I was.

I replied in as soothing a manner as possible, that I was a friend, anxious to assist him. Nevertheless, seeing that I kept my cloak about my face--for I was not willing to be recognized--he continued to look at me with distrust and terror. "What do you want?" he said, raising the lamp much as his wife had done, to see me the better.

"The answers to one or two questions," I replied firmly. "Answer them truly, and I promise you your troubles are at an end." So saying, I drew from my pouch the scrap of paper which had come to me so strangely. "When did you write this, my friend?" I continued, placing it before him.

He drew a deep breath at sight of it, and a look of comprehension and dismay crossed his face. For a moment he hesitated. Then in a hurried manner he said that he had never seen the paper.

"Come," I rejoined sternly, "look at it again. Let there be no mistake. When did you write that, and why?"

But still he shook his head; and, though I pressed him hard, continued so stubborn in his denial that, but for the look I had seen on his face when I first produced the paper, and the strange coincidence of his dismissal, I might have believed him. As it was, I saw nothing for it but to have him arrested and brought to my house, where I did not doubt he would tell the truth; and I was about to retire to give the necessary orders, when something in the sidelong glance I saw him cast at his wife caught my eye and furnished me with a new idea. Acting on this, I affected to be satisfied. I apologized for my intrusion on the ground of mistake, and gradually withdrawing to

the door asked him at the last moment to light me downstairs.

Complying with a shaking hand, he went out before me, and had nearly reached the foot of the staircase when I touched him on the shoulder.

"Now," I said bluntly, fixing him with my eyes, "your wife is no longer listening, and you can tell me the truth. Who employed you to write these words?"

Trembling so violently he had to lean on the balustrade for support, he answered me.

"Madame Nicholas," he whispered.

"What?" I cried, recoiling. I had no doubt he was telling me the truth now.

"The secretary's wife, do you mean? Be careful, man."

He nodded.

"When?" I asked suspiciously.

"Yesterday," he answered. "She is an old cat!" he continued, almost fiercely. "I hate her! But my wife is jealous."

"And did you throw it into my coach," I said, "on the Pont du Change, to-day?"

"God forbid!" he replied, shrinking into himself again. "I wrote it for her, and she took it away. She said it was a jest she was playing. That is all I know."

I saw it was, and after a few more words was content to dismiss him, bidding him keep silence on the matter, and remain at home in case I needed him. At the last, he plucked up spirit to ask me who I was; but preferring to keep that discovery for a day still to come, when I might appear as the benefactor of this little family, I told him sharply that I was one of the King's servants, and so left him.

It will be believed, however, that I found the information I had received little to my mind. The longer I dwelt on it, the more serious seemed the matter. While I could scarcely conceive any circumstances in which a woman would be likely to inform against her husband without cause, I could recall more than one dangerous conspiracy which had been frustrated by informers of that class--sometimes out of regard for the very persons against whom they informed. Viewed in this light only, the warning seemed to my mind sufficiently alarming, but when I came also to consider the secrecy with which Madame Nicholas had both prepared it--so that her hand might not be known--and conveyed it to me, the aspect of the case grew yet more formidable. In the result, I had not passed through two streets before my mind was made up to lay the case before the King, and the sagacity and penetration which were never wanting to my gracious master.

An unexpected rencontre which awaited me on my return to the Arsenal both confirmed me in this resolution and enabled me to carry it into effect. We succeeded in slipping in without difficulty, and duly found Maignan on guard at the door of my apartments. But a single glance at his face sufficed to show that something was wrong; nor did it need the look of penitence which he assumed on seeing us--a look so piteous that at another time it must have diverted me--to convince me that he had infringed my orders.

"How now, sirrah?" I said angrily, without waiting for him to speak. "What have you been doing?"

"They would take no refusal, Monseigneur," he answered plaintively, waving his hand toward the door.

"What!" I cried sternly, astonished; for this was an instance of such direct disobedience as I could scarce understand. "Did I not give you the strictest orders to deny me to everybody?"

"They would take no refusal, Monseigneur," he answered penitently, edging away from me as he spoke.

"Who are they?" I asked sternly, leaving the question of his punishment for another season. "Speak, rascal, though it shall not save you."

"There are M. le Marquis de la Varenne, and M. de Vitry," he said slowly, "and M. de Vic, and M. Erard, the engineer, and M. de Fontange, and----"

"*Pardieu!*" I cried, cutting him short in a rage; for he was going on counting on his fingers in a manner the most provoking. "Have you let in all Paris, dolt? Grace! that I should be served by a fool! Open the door, and let me see them!"

With that I was about to enter; when the door, which I had not perceived to be ajar, was suddenly thrown open, and a laughing face thrust out. It was the King's.



IT WAS THE KING. Page 48.

IT WAS THE KING. Page 48.

"Ha, ha! Grand-master!" he cried, vastly diverted by the success of his jest and the abrupt change which doubtless came over my countenance. "Never was such graceful hospitality, I'll be sworn! But come, pardon this varlet. And now embrace me, and tell me where you have been playing truant."

Saying these words with the charm which never failed him, and in his time won to his side more foes than his sword ever conquered, the King drew me into my room, where I found De Vic, Vitry, Roquelaure, and the rest. They all laughed heartily at my surprise, nor was Maignan, who had a pretty fancy, and was the author, it will be remembered, of that whimsical procession to Rosny after the battle of Ivry, which I have elsewhere described, far behind them; the rascal knowing well that the king's presence covered all, and that in my gratification at the honor done me I should be certain to overlook his impertinence.

Perceiving that this impromptu visit had no other object than to divert Henry--though he was kind enough to say that he felt uneasy when he did not see me often--I begged to know if he would honor me by staying to sup; but this he would not do, though he consented to drink a cup of my Arbois wine, and praised it highly. I thought I saw by and by that he was willing to be alone with me; and as I had every reason to desire this myself, I made an opportunity. Sending for Arnaud and some of my gentlemen, I committed my other guests to their care, and led the King into my closet, where, after requesting his leave to speak on business, I proceeded to unfold to him the adventure of the snowball, with all the particulars which I have here set down.

He listened very attentively, drumming on the table with his fingers; nor did he move or speak when I had done but still continued in the same attitude of deep thought. At last: "Grand-master," he said, touching with his hand the mark of the wound which still remained on his lip, "how long is it since Chalet's attempt--when I got this?"

"Seven years last Christmas, Sire," I answered.

"And Barrière's?"

"That was the year before. Avenious' plot was that year too."

"And the Italian, from Milan, of whom the Capuchin Honorio warned us?"

"That was two years ago, Sire."

"And how many more attempts have there been against my person?" he went on, much moved. Then falling into a tone of extreme sadness, he continued, "Rosny, my friend, they must succeed at last. No man can fight against his fate. The end is sure, notwithstanding all your fidelity and vigilance, and the love you bear me, for which I love you too. But Nicholas? Nicholas? Yet he has been careless and distraught of late. I have noticed it; and a month back I refused to give him an appointment, of which he wished to have the sale."

I did not dare to speak, and for a time Henry, too, remained silent. At length he rose with an air of resolution.

"We will clear this matter up within the hour!" he said firmly. "I will send my people back to the Louvre, and do you, Grand-master, order half-a-dozen Swiss to be ready to conduct us to this woman's house. When we have heard her we shall know what to do."

I tried my utmost to dissuade him, pleading that his presence could not be necessary, and might prove a hindrance; besides exposing his person to a certain amount of risk. But he would not listen. When I saw, therefore, that his mind was made up to go, and that as his spirits rose he was inclined to welcome this little expedition as a relief from the *ennui* which at times troubled him, I reluctantly withdrew my opposition and gave the necessary orders. The King dismissed his suite with a few kind words, and in a very short space we were on our way, under cover of darkness, to the secretary's house.

He lived at this time in a court off the Rue St. Jacques, not far from the church of that name; and the house being remote from the eyes and observations of the street, seemed not unfit for secret and desperate uses.

Although we found lights shining behind several of the barred windows, the wintry night, the darkness of the court, and perhaps the errand on which we came, imparted so gloomy an aspect to the place that the King hitched his sword forward, while I begged him to permit the Swiss who accompanied us to go on with us. This, however, he would not allow, and accordingly they were left at the entrance to the court with orders to follow at a given signal.

On the steps, the King, who, to disguise himself the better, had borrowed one of my cloaks, stumbled and almost fell. This threw him into a fit of laughter; for no sooner was he engaged in an adventure which promised to be dangerous than his spirits invariably rose to such a degree as to make him the most charming companion in peril man ever had. He was still shaking, and pulling me to and fro in one of those boyish frolics which sometimes swayed him, when a sudden outcry inside the house startled us into sobriety, and reminded us all too soon of the business which brought us thither.

Wondering what it might mean, I was about to rap on the door with my hilt when the King put me aside, and, by a happy instinct, tried the latch. The door yielded to his hands, and, slowly opening, gave us admittance.

We found ourselves in a gloomy hall, ill-lit, and hung with patched arras. In one corner stood a group of servants. Of these some looked scared and some amused, but all were so much taken up with the movements of a harsh-faced woman, who was pacing the opposite side of the hall, that they did not heed our entrance. A momentary glance at this strange state of things showed me that the woman was Madame Nicholas; but I was still at a loss to guess what she was doing or what was happening in the house.

I stood a moment, but finding she still took no notice of us, I beckoned to one of the servants, and bade him tell his mistress a gentleman would speak with her. The man went with the message; but she sent him off with a flea in his ear, and screamed at him so violently that for a moment I thought she was mad. Then it appeared that the object of her attention was a door at the side of the hall; for, stopping suddenly in her walk, she went up to it, and struck it passionately with her hands.

"Come out!" she cried. "Come out, you villain!"

Restraining the King, I went forward myself, and, saluting her politely, begged a word with her apart, thinking she would recognize me.

Her answer, however, showed that she did not. "No!" she cried, waving me off, in the utmost excitement. "No; you will not get me away--I know you. You are as bad one as the other." Then turning again to the door, she continued, "Come out! Do you hear! Come out! I'll have no more of your intrigues and your Hallots!"

I pricked up my ears at the name "But, Madame," I said, "one moment."

"Begone!" she retorted, turning on me so wrathfully that I fairly recoiled before her. "I shall stay here till I drop; but I will have him out and expose him. There shall be an end of his precious plots and his Hallots if I have to go to the King!"

Words so curiously *à propos* could not but recall to my mind the confusion into which my mention of Du Hallot had thrown the secretary earlier in the day. And since they seemed also to be consistent with the warning conveyed to me, and indeed to explain it, they should have corroborated my worst suspicions. But a sense of something unreal and fantastic, with which I could not grapple, continued to puzzle me in the presence of this angry woman; and it was with no great assurance that I said, "Do I understand then, Madame, that M. du Hallot is in that room?"



"ARE YOU COMING OUT THERE?" *Page 61.*

"ARE YOU COMING OUT THERE?" *Page 61.*

"M. du Hallot?" she replied, in a tone that was almost a scream. "No; but he would be if he had taken the hint I sent him! He would be! I will have no more secrecy, however, and no more plots. I have suffered enough already, and now Madame shall suffer if she has not forgotten how to blush. Are you coming out there?" she continued, once more applying herself to the door, her face inflamed with passion. "I shall stay! Oh, I shall stay, I assure you. Until morning if necessary!"

"But, Madame," I said, beginning to see daylight, and finding words with difficulty--for I already heard in fancy the King's laughter and could conjure up the endless quips and cranks with which he would pursue me--"your warning did not perhaps reach M. du Hallot!"

"It reached his coach, at any rate," the scold retorted. "Another time I will have no half-measures. But as for that," she continued, turning on me suddenly with her arms akimbo, and the fiercest of airs, "I would like to know what business it is of yours, Monsieur, whether it reached him or not! I know you--you are in league with my husband! You are here to shelter him, and this Madame du Hallot! But---"

At that moment, however, the door at last opened; and M. Nicholas, wearing an aspect so meek and crestfallen that I hardly knew him, came out. He was followed by a young woman plainly dressed, and looking almost as much frightened as himself; in whom I had no difficulty in recognizing Felix's wife.

"Why!" Madame Nicholas cried, her face falling. "This is not--who is this? Who--" with increased vehemence--"is this baggage, I would like to know?"

"My dear," the secretary protested earnestly, spreading out his hands--fortunately he had eyes only for his wife, and did not see us--"this is one of your ridiculous mistakes! It is, I assure you. This is the wife of a clerk whom I dismissed to-day, and she has been with me begging me to reinstate her husband. That is all. That is all, my dear. You have made this---"

I heard no more, for, taking advantage of the obscurity of the hall, and the preoccupation of the couple, I made hurriedly for the door, and passing out into the darkness, found myself at once in the embrace of the King, who, seizing me round the neck, laughed on my shoulder till he cried, continually adjuring me to laugh also, and ejaculating between the paroxysms, "Poor Du Hallot! Poor Du Hallot!" with many things of the same nature, which any one acquainted with court life may supply for himself.

I confess I did not on my part find it so easy to laugh: partly because I am not of so gay a disposition as that great prince, and partly because I cannot always see the ludicrous side of events in which I myself take part. But on the King at last assuring me that he would not betray the secret even to La Varenne, I took comfort and gradually reconciled myself to an episode which, unlike the more serious events it now becomes my duty to relate, had only one result, and that unimportant; I mean the introduction to my service of the clerk Felix, who, proving worthy of confidence, remained with me after the lamentable death of the King my master, and is to-day one of those to whom I entrust the preparation of these Memoirs.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SNOWBALL ***

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