

Weyman Stanley John

The Snowball



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Содержание

THE SNOWBALL

4

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

10

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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."

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