

## THE STRATAGEM

“On the return march,” continued Duguesclin, “Dodu said, ‘The spy is on the watch. But count the letters in the name of Aristotle’s favourite disciple.’ I guessed (as he intended me to do) that he did not mean Aristotle. He wished to suggest Plato, and so Socrates; hence I counted A-L-C-I-B-I-A-D-E-S=10, and thus completely baffled the spy for that day. The following day he rapped out ‘Rahu’ very emphatically, meaning that the next lunar eclipse would be the proper moment for our evasion, and spent the rest of the day in small talk, so as to lull the suspicion of the spy. For three days he had no opportunity of saying anything, being in the hospital with fever. On the fourth day: ‘I have discovered that spy is a damned swine of an opium-smoking lieutenant from Toulon. We have him: he doesn’t know Paris. Now then: draw a line from the Gare de l’Est to the Etoile; erect an equilateral triangle on that line. Think of the name of the world-famous man who lives at the apex.’ (This was a touch of super-genius, as it forced me to use the English alphabet for the basis of the cipher, and the spy spoke no language but his own, except a little Swiss.) ‘From this time I shall communicate in a cipher of the direct additive numerical order, and the key shall be his name.’

“It was only my incomparably strong constitution which enabled me to add the task of deciphering his conversation to that imposed by Government. To memorise perfectly a cipher communication of half-an-hour is no mean feat of mnemonics, especially when the deciphered message is itself couched in the obscurest symbolism. The spy must have thought his reason in danger if he succeeded in reading the hieroglyphs which were the mere pieces of the puzzle of the master-thinker. For instance, I would get this message: owhmomdvvtxskzvqcxzllhtrejrjrgscpxjrmsgausrgwhbdxzldabe, which, when deciphered (and the spy would gnash his teeth every time Dodu signalled a W!), only meant: ‘The peaches of 1761 are luminous in the gardens of Versailles.’

“Or again: ‘Hunt: the imprisoned Pope: the Pompadour: the Stag and Cross.’ ‘The men of the fourth of September; their leader divided by the letters of the Victim of the Eighth of Thermidor.’ ‘Crillon was unfortunate that day, though braver than ever.’