

THE STRATAGEM

and knotting his brows, came suddenly to a decision. "What do you know of heat?" he cried, fixing Bevan with the intensity of a demon. "What do you know of desolation?" Taken aback, as well he might be, Bevan was at a loss to reply. "Stay!" cried the other, "What if I told you my story? There is no one here but ourselves." He glared menacingly at Bevan, seemed to seek to read his soul. "Are you a man to be trusted?" he barked, and broke off short.

At another time Bevan would most certainly have declined to become the confidant of a stranger; but here the solitude, the heat, not a little boredom induced by the previous manner of his companion, and even a certain mistrust of how he might take a refusal, combined to elicit a favourable reply.

Stately as an oak, Bevan answered, "I was born an English gentleman, and I trust that I have never done anything to derogate from that estate." "I am a Justice of the Peace," he added after a momentary pause.

"I knew it!" cried the other excitedly. "The trained legal mind is that of all others which will appreciate my story. Swear, then," he went on with sudden gravity, "swear that you will never whisper to any living soul the smallest word of what I am about to tell you! Swear by the soul of your dead mother!"

"My mother is alive," returned Bevan.

"I knew it!" exclaimed his companion, a great and strange look of god-like pity illuminating his sunburnt face. It was such a look as one sees upon many statues of Buddha, a look of divine, of impersonal compassion.

"Then swear by the Lord Chancellor!"

Bevan was more than ever persuaded that the stranger was a Frenchman. However, he readily gave the required promise.

"My name," said the other, "is Duguesclin. Does that tell you my story?" he asked impressively. "Does that convey anything to your mind?"

"Nothing at all."

"I knew it!" said the man from the tropics. "Then I must tell you all. In my veins boils the fiery blood of the greatest of the French warriors, and my mother was the lineal descendant of the Maid of Saragossa."