

THE STRATAGEM

in his cabinet made the dispositions of the armies of the Ardennes; and the 1890 scheme of the fortifications of Lunéville was due to his genius alone. For this reason the Government were loth to condemn him, though public opinion revolted bitterly against his crime. You remember that, having proved that women after the age of fifty were a useless burden to the State, he had demonstrated his belief by decapitating and devouring his widowed mother. It was consequently the intention of the Government to connive at his escape on the voyage, and to continue to employ him under an assumed name in a flat in an entirely different quarter of Paris. However, the Government fell suddenly; a rival ousted him, and his sentence was carried out with as much severity as if he had been a common criminal.

"It was to such a man (naturally) that I looked to devise a plan for our escape. But rack my brains as I would—my grandmother was a Warwickshire Higginbotham—I could devise no means of getting into touch with him. He must, however, have divined my wishes; for, one day after he had been about a month upon the island (I had been there seven months myself) he stumbled and fell as if struck by the sun at a moment when I was close to him. And as he lay upon the ground he managed to pinch my ankle three times. I caught his glance—he hinted rather than gave me the sign of recognition of the fraternity of Freemasons. Are you a Mason?"

"I am Past Provincial Deputy Grand Sword-Bearer of this province," returned Bevan. "I founded Lodge 14,883, 'Boetic' and Lodge 17,212, 'Colenso,' and I am Past Grand Haggai in my Provincial Grand Chapter."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Duguesclin enthusiastically.

Bevan began to dislike this conversation exceedingly. Did this man—this criminal—know who he was? He knew he was a J.P., that his mother was alive, and now his Masonic dignities. He distrusted this Frenchman more and more. Was the story but a pretext for the demand of a loan? The stranger looked prosperous, and had a first-class ticket. More likely a blackmailer: perhaps he knew of other things—say that affair at Oxford—or the incident of the Edgware Road—or the matter of Esmé Holland. He determined to be more than ever on his guard.