THE SUN
KALGOORLIE, WESTERN AUSTRALIA, AUSTRALIA
6 DECEMBER 1914
(page 12)

THE STRATAGEM

BY ALEISTER CROWLEY
IN THE "ENGLISH REVIEW"

The fellow-travellers climbed down on to the fiery sand of the platform. It was a junction, a junction of that kind where there is no town for miles, and where the resources of the railway and its neighbourhood compare unfavourably with those of the average quarantine station.

The first to descend was a man unmistakably English. He was complaining of the management even while he extracted his hand-baggage from the carriage with the assistance of his companion. "It is positively a disgrace to civilisation," he was saving, "that there should be no connection at such a station as this, an important station, sir, let me tell you, the pivot—if I may use the metaphor—of the branch which serves practically the whole of Muckshire south of the Tream. And we have certainly one hour to wait, and Heaven knows it's more likely to be two, and perhaps three. And, of course, there's not as much as a bar nearer than Fat-loam; and if we got there we should positive and actual disgrace to the railway that allows it, to the country that tolerates it, to the civilisation that permits that such things should be. The same thing happened to me here last year, sir, though luckily on that occasion I had but half-an-hour to wait. But I wrote to The Times a strong half-column letter on the subject, and I'm damned if they didn't refuse to print it. Of course, our independent press, etc.; I might have known. I tell you, sir, this country is run by a ring, a dirty ring, a gang of Jews, Scotchmen, Irish, Welsh—where's the good old jolly True Blue Englishman? In the cart, sir, in the cart."

The train gave a convulsive backward jerk, and lumbered off in imitation of the solitary porter who, stationed opposite the guard's van, had witnessed without emotion the hurling forth of two trunks like rocks from a volcano, and after a moment's contemplation had, with screwed mouth, mooched along

the platform to his grub, which he would find in an isolated cottage some three hundred yards away.

In strong contrast to the Englishman, with his moustache afforesting a whitish face, marked with deep red rings on neck and forehead, his impending paunchiness and his full suit of armour, was the small, active man with the pointed beard whom fate had thrown first into the same compartment, and then into the same hour of exile from all their fellows.

His eyes were astonishingly black and fierce; his beard was grizzled and his face heavily lined and obviously burnt by tropical suns; but that face also expressed intelligence, strength, and resourcefulness in a degree which would have made him an ideal comrade in a forlorn hope, or the defence of a desperate village. Across the back of his left hand was a thick and heavy scar. In spite of all this, he was dressed with singular neatness and correctness; which circumstance, although his English was purer than that of his companion in distress, made the latter secretly incline to suspect him of being a Frenchman. In spite of the quietness of his dress and the self-possession of his demeanour, the sombre glitter of those black eyes, pinpoints below shaggy eyebrows, inspired the large man with a certain uneasiness. Not at all a chap to quarrel with, was his thought. However, being himself a widely-travelled man—Boulogne, Dieppe, Paris, Switzerland, and even Venice—he had none of that insularity of which foreigners accuse some Englishmen, and he had endeavoured to make conversation during the journey. The small man had proved a poor companion, taciturn to a fault, sparing of words where a nod would satisfy the obligations of courtesy, and seemingly fonder of his pipe than of his fellowman. A man with a secret, thought the Englishman.

The train had jolted out of the station and the porter had faded from the landscape. “A deserted spot,” remarked the Englishman, whose name was Bevan, “especially in such fearful heat. Really, in the summer of 1911, it was hardly as bad. Do you know, I remember once at Boulogne” He broke off sharply, for the brown man, sticking the ferrule of his stick repeatedly in the sand, 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.”

Bevan was startled, and showed it.

“After the siege, sir, she was honourably married to a nobleman,” snapped Duguesclin. “Do you think a man of my ancestry will permit a stranger to lift the shadow of an eyebrow against the memory of my great-grandmother?”

The Englishman protested that nothing had been further from his thoughts.

“I suppose so,” proceeded the other more quietly. “And the more, perhaps, that I am a convicted murderer.”

Bevan was now fairly alarmed.

“I am proud of it,” continued Duguesclin. “At the age of twenty-five my blood was more fiery than it is to-day. I married. Four years later I found my wife in the embraces of a neighbour. I slew him. I slew her. I slew our three children, for

vipers breed only vipers. I slew the servants; they were accomplices of the adultery, or if not, they should at any rate not witness their master's shame. I slew the gendarmes who came to take me—servile hirelings of a corrupt republic. I set my castle on fire, determined to perish in the ruins. Unfortunately, a piece of masonry, falling, struck me on the arm. My rifle dropped. The accident was seen, and I was rescued by the firemen. I determined to live; it was my duty to my ancestors to continue the family of which I was the sole direct scion. It is in search of a wife that I am travelling in England."

He paused, and gazed proudly on the scenery, with the air of a Selkirk. Bevan suppressed the obvious comment on the surprising termination of the Frenchman's narrative. He only remarked, "Then you were not guillotined?"

"I was not, sir," retorted the other passionately. "At that time capital punishment was never inflicted in France, though not officially abrogated. I may say," he added, with the pride of a legislator, "that my action lent considerable strength to the agitation which led to its reintroduction.

"No, sir, I was not guillotined. I was sentenced to perpetual imprisonment in Devil's Island." He shuddered. "Can you imagine that accursed Isle? Can your fancy paint one tithe of its horror? Can nightmare itself shadow that inferno, that limbo of the damned? My language is strong, sir; but no language can depict that hell. I will spare you the description. Sand, vermin, crocodiles, venomous snakes, miasma, mosquitoes, fever, filth, toil, jaundice, malaria, starvation, foul undergrowth, weedy swamps breathing out death, hideous and bloated trees of poison, themselves already poisoned by their earth, heat unendurable, insufferable, intolerable, unbearable (as the Daily Telegraph said at the time of the Dreyfus case), heat continuous and stifling, no breeze but the pestilential stench of the lagoon, heat that turned the skin into a raging sea of irritation to which the very stings of the mosquitoes and centipedes came as a relief, the interminable task of the day beneath the broiling sun, the lash on every slightest infraction of the harsh prison rules, or even of the laws of politeness toward our warders, men only one degree less damned than we ourselves—all this was nothing. The only amusement of the governors of such a place is cruelty; and their own discomfort makes them more ingenious than all the inquisitors of Spain, than Arabs in their religious frenzy, than Burmans and Kachens and Shans in their Buddhist hatred of all living men, than even the Chinese in their cold lust of cruelty. The governor was a profound psychologist;

no corner of the mind that he did not fathom, so as to devise a means of twisting it to torture.

"I remember one of us who took pleasure in keeping his spade bright—it was the regulation that spades must be kept bright, a torture in itself in such a place, where mildew grows on everything as fast almost as snow falls in happier climates. Well, sir, the governor found out that this man took a pleasure in the glint of the sun on the steel, and he forbade that man to clean his spade. A trifle, indeed. What do you know of what prisoners think of trifles? The man went raving mad, and for no other reason. It seemed to him that such detailed refinement of cruelty was a final proof of the innate and inherent devilishness of the universe. Insanity is the logical consequence of such a faith. No, sir, I will spare you the description."

Bevan thought that there had already been too much description, and in his complacent English way surmised that Duguesclin was exaggerating, as he was aware that Frenchmen did. But he only remarked that it must have been terrible. He would have given a good deal, now, to have avoided the conversation. It was not altogether nice to be on a lonely platform with a self-confessed multiple murderer, who had presumably escaped only by a further and extended series of crimes.

"But you ask," pursued Duguesclin, "you ask how I escaped? That, sir, is the story I propose to tell you. My previous remarks have been but preliminary; they have no pertinence or interest, I am aware; but they were necessary, since you so kindly expressed interest in my personality, my family history—heroic (I may claim it) as is the one, and tragic (no one will deny it) as is the other."

Bevan again reflected that his interlocutor must be as bad a psychologist as the governor of Devil's Island was a good one; for he had neither expressed nor felt the slightest concern with either of these matters.

"Well, sir, to my story! Among the convicts there was one universal pleasure, a pleasure that could cease only with life or with the empire of the reason, a pleasure that the governor might (and did) indeed restrict, but could not take away. I refer to hope—the hope of escape. Yes, sir, that spark (alone of all its ancient fires) burnt in this breast—and in that of my fellow-convicts. And in this I did not look so much to myself as to another. I am not endowed with any great intellect," he modestly pursued, "my grandmother was pure English, a Higginbotham, one of the Warwickshire Higginbothams" (what has that to do with his stupidity? thought Bevan) "and the majority of

my companions were men not only devoid of intelligence, but of education. The one pinnacled exception was the great Dodu—ha! you start?" Bevan had not done anything of the sort; he had continued to exhibit the most stolid indifference to the story.

"Yes, you are not mistaken; it was indeed the world-famous philosopher, the discoverer of Dodium, rarest of known elements, supposed only to exist in the universe to the extent of the thirty-thousand and fifth part of a milligramme, and that in the star called y Pegasi; it was Dodu who has shattered the logical process of obversion, and reduced the quadrangle of oppositions to the condition of the British square at Abu-Klea. So much you know; but this perhaps you did not know, that, although a civilian, he was the greatest strategist of France. It was he who in his cabinet made the dispositions of the armies of the Ardennes; and the 1890 scheme of the fortifications of Luneville 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 Esme Holland. He determined to be more than ever on his guard.

"You will understand with what joy," continued Duguesclin, innocent or careless of the sinister thoughts which occupied his companion, "I received and answered this unmistakable token of friendship. That day no further opportunity of intercourse occurred, but I narrowly watched him on the morrow, and saw that he was dragging his feet in an irregular way. Ha! thought I, a drag for long, an ordinary pace for short. I imitated him eagerly, giving the Morse letter A. His alert mind grasped instantly my meaning; he altered his code (which had been of a different order) and replied with a Morse B on my own system. I answered C; he returned D. From that moment we could talk fluently and freely as if we were on the terrace of the Cafe de la Paix in our beloved Paris. However, conversation in such circumstances is a lengthy affair. During the whole march to our work he only managed to say, 'Escape soon—please God.' Before his crime he had been an atheist. I was indeed glad to find that punishment had brought repentance."

Bevan himself was relieved. He had carefully refrained from admitting the existence of a French Freemason; that one should have repented filled him with a sense of almost personal triumph. He began to like Duguesclin, and to believe in him. His wrong had been hideous; if his vengeance seemed excessive and even indiscriminate, was not he a Frenchman? Frenchmen do these things! And after all Frenchmen were men. Bevan felt a great glow of benevolence; he remembered that he was not only a man, but a Christian. He determined to set the stranger at his ease.

"Your story interests me intensely," said he. "I sympathise deeply with you in your wrongs and in your sufferings. I am heartily thankful that you have escaped, and I beg of you to proceed with the narration of your adventures."

Duguesclin needed no such encouragement. His attitude, from that of the listless weariness with which he had descended

from the train, had become animated, sparkling, fiery; he was carried away by the excitement of his passionate memories.

"On the second day Dodu was able to explain his mind. 'If we escape, it must be by a stratagem,' he signalled. It was an obvious remark; but Dodu had no reason to think highly of my intelligence. 'By a stratagem,' he repeated with emphasis.

" 'I have a plan,' he continued. 'It will take twenty-three days to communicate, if we are not interrupted; between three and four months to prepare; two hours and eight minutes to execute. It is theoretically possible to escape by air, by water, or by earth. But as we are watched day and night, it would be useless to try to drive a tunnel to the mainland; we have no aeroplanes or balloons, or means of making them. But if we could once reach the water's edge, which we must do in whatever direction we set out if we only keep in a straight line, and if we can find a boat unguarded, and if we can avoid arousing the alarm, then we have merely to cross the sea, and either find a land where we are unknown, or disguise ourselves and our boat and return to Devil's Island as shipwrecked mariners. The latter idea would be foolish. You will say that the Governor would know that Dodu would not be such a fool; but more, he would know also that Dodu would not be such a fool as to try to take advantage of that circumstance; and he would be right, curse him!'

"It implies the intensest depth of feeling to curse in the Morse code with one's feet—ah! how we hated him.

"Dodu explained to me that he was telling me these obvious things for several reasons: (1) to gauge my intelligence by my reception of them; (2) to make sure that if we failed it should be by my stupidity and not by his neglect to inform me of every detail; (3) because he had acquired the professorial habit as another man might have the gout.

"Briefly, however, this was his plan; to elude the guards, make for the coast, capture a boat, and put to sea. Do you understand? Do you get the idea?"

Bevan replied that it seemed to him the only possible plan.

"A man like Dodu," pursued Duguesclin, "takes nothing for granted. He leaves no precaution untaken; in his plans, if chance be an element, it is an element whose value is calculated to twenty-eight places of decimals.

"But hardly had he laid down these bold outlines of his scheme when interruption came. On the fourth day of our intercourse he signalled only 'Wait. Watch me!' again and again.

“In the evening he manoeuvred to get to the rear of the line of convicts, and only then dragged out ‘There is a traitor, a spy. Henceforth I must find a new means of communicating the details of my plan. I have thought it all out. I shall speak in a sort of rebus, which not even you will be able to understand unless you have all the pieces—and the key. Mind you engrave upon your memory every word I say.’

“The following day: ‘Do you remember the taking of the old mill by the Prussians in ‘70? My difficulty is that I must give you the skeleton of the puzzle, which I can’t do in words. But watch the line of my spade and my heelmarks, and take a copy.’

“I did this with the utmost minuteness of accuracy and obtained this figure. At my autopsy,” said Duguesclin, dramatically, “this should be found engraved upon my heart.”

He drew a notebook from his pocket, and rapidly sketched the subjoined figure for the now interested Bevan.

“You will note that the figure has eight sides, and that twenty-seven crosses are disposed in groups of three, while in one corner is a much larger and thicker cross and two smaller crosses not so symmetrical. This group represents the element of chance; and you will at least gain a hint of the truth if you reflect that eight is the cube of two, and twenty-seven of three.”

Bevan looked intelligent.

“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 suspicions 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;

owh-momdvvtxskzvgcqxzllhtrejrgscpxjrmsgausrgwhbdxzldabe,

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.'

"Such were the indications from which I sought to piece together our plan of escape!

"Perhaps rather by intuition than by reason, I gathered from some two hundred of such clues that the guards Bertrand, Rolland, and Monet, had been bribed, and also promised advancement, and (above all) removal from the hated Island, should they connive at our escape. It seemed that the Government had still use for its first strategist. The eclipse was due some ten weeks ahead, and needed neither bribe nor promise. The difficulty was to ensure the presence of Bertrand as sentinel in our corridor, Rolland at the ring-fence, and Monet at the

outposts. The chances against such a combination at the eclipse were infinitesimal, 99,487,306,294,236,873,489 to 1.

"It would have been madness to trust to luck in so essential a matter. Dodu set to work to bribe the Governor himself. This was unfortunately impossible; for (a) no one could approach the governor even by means of the intermediary of the bribed guards; (b) the offence for which he had been promoted to the governorship was of a nature unpardonable by any Government. He was in reality more a prisoner than ourselves; (c) he was a man of immense wealth, assured career, and known probity.

"I cannot now enter into his history, which you no doubt know in any case. I will only say that it was of such a character that these facts (of so curiously contradictory appearance—on the face of it) apply absolutely. However the tone of confidence which thrilled in Dodu's messages, 'Pluck grapes in Burgundy; press vats in Cognac; ha!' 'The souffle with the nuts in it is ready for us by the Seine,' and the like, showed me that his giant brain had not only grappled with the problem, but solved it to his satisfaction. The plan was perfect; on the night of the eclipse those three guards would be on duty at such and such gates; Dodu would tear his clothes into strips, bind and gag Bertrand, come and release me. Together we should spring on Rolland, take his uniform and rifle, and leave him bound and gagged. We should then dash for the shore, do the same with Monet, and then, dressed in their uniforms, take the boat of an octopus-fisher, row to the harbour, and ask in the name of the governor for the use of his steam yacht to chase an escaped fugitive. We should then steam into the track of ships and set fire to the yacht, so as to be 'rescued' and conveyed to England, whence we could arrange with the French Government for rehabilitation.

"Such was the simple yet subtle plan of Dodu. Down to the last detail was it perfected—until one fatal day.

"The spy, stricken by yellow fever, dropped suddenly dead in the fields before noon 'Cease work' had sounded. Instantly, without a moment's hesitation, Dodu strode across to me and said, at the risk of the lash: 'The whole plan which I have explained to you in cipher these last four months is a blind. That spy knew all. His lips are sealed in death. I have another plan, the real plan, simpler and surer. I will tell it to you to-morrow.'

The whistle of an approaching engine interrupted this tragic episode of the adventures of Duguesclin.

“ ‘Yes,’ said Dodu” (continued the narrator), “ ‘I have a better plan. I have a stratagem. I will tell it you tomorrow.’

The train which was to carry the narrator and his hearer to Mudchester came round the corner. “That morrow,” glowered Duguesclin, “that morrow never came. The same sun that slew the spy broke the great brain of Dodu; that very afternoon, a gibbering maniac, they thrust him in the padded room, never again to emerge.”

The train drew up at the platform of the little junction. He almost hissed in Bevan’s face.

“It was not Dodu at all,” he screamed, “it was a common criminal, an epileptic; he should never have been sent to Devil’s Island at all. He had been mad for months. His messages had no sense at all; it was a cruel practical joke!”

“But how,” said Bevan getting into his carriage and looking back, “how did you escape in the end?”

“By a stratagem,” replied the Irishman, and jumped into another compartment.