



Napoleon's Gambit

A novel by Eric Goldman

Sailing through history ...
to commit the perfect crime

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This is an historical adventure, which blends facts and fiction.

The facts are:

- 1) Napoleon signed the Treaty of Valençay with King Ferdinand VII of Spain, on December 11th, 1813. Its goal was to restore Ferdinand to the throne that he was forced to abdicate to Napoleon's brother, Joseph, in 1808.
- 2) The Battle of Vittorio occurred on June 21st, 1813. The French were defeated by Lord Wellington and relinquished Spain.
- 3) Wellington's Vittorio dispatch describes an item of French property found at the battle, as 'a single military chest containing one hundred thousand francs in gold coins.'
- 4) Sir Gabriel Hopetown Stoke commanded a division of British troops at the Battle of Vittorio. According to his memoirs, his men found 'some money tumbrils loaded with chests,' and looted them.
- 5) French records indicate that the tumbrils contained five million francs worth of gold coins.
- 6) The Battle of Aix Roads took place on the 11th and 12th of April, 1809. To accommodate the story, the battle was moved to June 1813, but the events leading up to the battle and the two days of the mission itself, are accurately depicted.
- 7) Captain Lord Thomas Cochrane was born in 1775 and died in 1860. Some of the words spoken by Thomas, Lord Mulgrave and Admirals Gambier and Harvey, in the events leading up to and during the Battle of Aix Roads, were extracted from Cochrane's *Autobiography of a Seaman*.
- 8) Dr. James Guthrie was the surgeon and doctor aboard Captain Lord Cochrane's ship, *Impérieuse*, during the battle of Aix Roads. James and Thomas were friends.
- 9) With one obvious exception, the technologies used on *Bit-by-Bit* exist today, albeit in some cases, in less sophisticated forms.

The rest is fiction.

Dedication

To Nancy, Jason and Nikki: your presence in my life saved me in the storm. Without you, there would be no book.

Chapter One

December 3, 2009

I stare out the channel to the North Atlantic. The water moves uneasily in the wind and tendrils of spray tear off each crest. Why is it that what we do defines us more than who we are? Losing my boat has shipwrecked my life.

Sighing, I turn from the sea and walk. It's still cool in the shadows, but the fog has thinned and the air is crisp. Another perfect day in paradise brewing.

Crossing the flinty cobblestones of the King's Square, I sense a presence. I pause at a storefront window. Yes, there's his reflection in the glass. Twice yesterday, and now he's pointing that same camera at me again. He doesn't blend. He's tall and thin, and the baldpate above his silver fuzz looks like it's grown a little taller than his hair. I'm lonely, but

this is ridiculous.

I turn and examine the square. Not many people about yet. Why would you follow someone when there's no one to hide behind? I point at him and walk toward him. He looks startled for a moment, and then shrugs and returns the camera to its bag.

He raises his head defiantly, smiles and steps forward. "Mister Rick? Mister Joshua Rick? My name is Admiral Stoke. I'm with the Royal Navy."

I stop. I thought I'd found another home in the navy, before an Admiral told me to resign. I look at this one, arrogantly spying on me, and my frustration surges. "*Admiral Stoke?* That's amazing. Did your parents know you would join the navy when they named you?"

His smile fades. "I'll take that as a weak attempt at humor."

I lean closer and say, "Why are you photographing me?"

Stepping back he says, "Keep your powder dry, will you? I'm here to recruit you for a mission. I've just completed our routine background check. You are our one in a million man. When we thought we had lost you in the storm, we tried to send out Bermudian search and rescue."

He thrusts out his hand and I shake it: weak and damp. "I already tried the navy. It didn't work out."

Nodding, he says quickly. "We don't care about that."

He knew. That was some background check. He leans back casually against a store window; the seams of his khaki slacks are perfectly pressed, a gold chain nestles at his shirt's open collar, and his jacket shimmers like silk. I look away from him, at the still shuttered stores.

"Thanks, but no thanks." I turn to walk away.

"We'll pay you to build your dreamboat and then to circumnavigate it solo, no expense spared. We'll also pay you five

million dollars for your trouble, and, when the mission's over, you can keep the boat. Interested?"

I turn back and study him. I slowly shake my head. "When a deal sounds too good to be true, it always is. What's the catch?"

He smiles. "Some breakfast? We both know the storm wrecked your boat and that you had no insurance. What have you got to lose?"

An Admiral doing his own spying and recruiting for a mission to build my dreamboat?

"Freddie's is just across the square," I say, and lead the way inside its green archway. Sunshine splashes through its open shutters and the stale smell of beer, frying onions and cigarettes hangs. The Admiral strides to a table at the rear, away from the diners seated near the windows. He wedges himself into the corner seat and motions me to sit opposite.

We order. I play with a puddle on the table till the coffee and toast arrives. I sip from my cup and say, "Okay, Mister. Spill the beans. What's this mission all about?"

He leans across the table and says softly. "As I said before. My name is Admiral Stoke. Please use it."

I nod. It's his game. "Okay, Admiral Stoke. I'm going to be late for work. What could the Royal Navy possibly want me for?"

He smiles. "I'll level with you. We really do need you."

"Can I see some ID? You remind me of Cassius."

He lays a polished leather briefcase on the table-top, extracts an official ID laminated in plastic, and hands it to me: Edmund Clayton Stoke. Admiral. Portsmouth Naval Research Center. I hand the ID back. He returns it to his briefcase, slides it under the chair and raises both hands. The sleeves of his jacket fall, revealing scrawny arms. "Look, no tricks up my sleeve. You can trust me."

I laugh. "Right. What did you mean - you thought you had lost me in the storm? How long have you guys been doing this routine background

check?”

A lopsided grin slides across his jaw. His mouth works, as if he’s arguing with himself. Finally he squares his shoulders and says, “Well, old boy, in point of fact, about six months.”

I sit up in amazement. My cheeks flush. What was I doing, while these guys spied on me? Half a year! If I hadn’t seen the effort it cost Cassius to tell the truth, I wouldn’t have believed it. I glance at him, elegantly upright in his chair. He laughs smugly. “Don’t worry. Your secrets are safe with us.”

I sit back slowly. “Why don’t you tell me why you’re here, then?”

He nods. Scans the room and leans in to say quietly. “As I said. We want you to circumnavigate in your dreamboat. Only without using fossil fuels. Can you?”

I stare at him. “The Royal Navy wants me to do this, or you? Why is this so important that they sent you instead of a -,” I trail off, unsure of the appropriate rank for recruiting me.

He smiles. “A woman? I thought of the perfect one, too. But we digress. Can you sail around on your own without using fossil fuels?”

“Why did the Navy send an Admiral to recruit a sailor?”

He chuckles. “Usually, old boy, you would be right. But this mission is of vital importance. I want to handle this myself – make sure we get the right man for the job. So let me ask again. Can you do it? Sail around with no fossil fuels on board?”

I shrug. “Why do you want me to sail around?”

He shakes his head. “We’ll get to the why in due course. Answer the question. Can you survive at sea for a year with no fossil fuels on board?”

“No fossil fuels? Not even propane for cooking?”

“Yes. No fossil fuels allowed on board.”

“I’m not sure. It takes a great deal of electricity to run a fossil-free boat.”

“But they used to do it, did they not; the Romans, Phoenicians, the Royal Navy? Perhaps not round the world, but for long periods of time. Why can’t you?”

“They used coal for cooking and oil for lighting. And those guys didn’t sail solo. I have to sleep and without electricity, no one’s in charge. An unlit boat with no radar signature, I’d be invisible in a tanker’s path.”

I butter some toast. If I could build this boat, I could cruise around the world without ever buying fuel again. “I’ve been reading about some of the new hydrogen generators,” I say. “I would need to do some research. When you said ‘*my dreamboat*’ that I would get to build it on your tab, how does that work? Surely there’s a committee, a budget? This is the Admiralty, not so?”

“Absolutely not. Committees make compromised designs, resulting in compromised solutions. What we want is the best possible sailing ship for the purpose. One like your old one,” he says, pointing across the square in the general direction of the sea. “Except, of course, one that’s floating. And with a few enhancements.”

“You thinking of a six-inch gun on the foredeck? Who is in charge of the project to design and build the boat?”

“You are - you’re in command until the mission gets underway. Then you will report to me, although, while at sea, you will obviously be skipper and crew aboard the boat, as you always are.”

“And what’s this about no expense spared. What’s the budget?”

“Ten million Pounds, about twenty million US Dollars. That will be sufficient, will it not?”

“Probably, but it depends on what these new enhancements are. What about the course, the route – about how long is this whole thing expected to take?”

“You begin by sailing from Portsmouth to Fiji. There you will participate in a special mission for a month and then you will sail back to Portsmouth. The first phase you will take relatively easy, perhaps five months. The last phase you will do as fast as possible, to show how quickly the boat can be driven. Ideally in less than three months.”

“Fiji to Portsmouth in ninety days! Although if the *Cutty Sark’s* record was seventy-two from Sydney...” I pause, recalling distances, routes, currents and times of year. But then his words register. “Special mission? So this is why you want me to do this?”

“Yes. Well, I’m afraid that the special mission is on a need to know basis. And your need to know occurs later.”

“Ah,” I say, “the catch.”

He smiles. “We consider it a very important experiment. A very valuable one, even. But consider this, you are being recruited for a mission for the British Government. It can’t be illegal. No drugs. What have you got to lose?”

“My life. Who says your government is not above illegal activity?”

He frowns, draws breath to speak, but then he shrugs.

“Demonstrate that the boat is feasible and that you can sail around the world without using any fuels. Then, and only then, will you be given the required official clearance and told all about the secret mission. But first, make the boat work.”

“I guess we’ve reached the show-stopper. The real mission is what happens in Fiji. Not so? If you want me to do this thing for you, you’re going to have to level with me.”

He shakes his head. “I said we want a self-sufficient, self-sustaining boat. And we do. And you want just such a boat, do you not? Not to mention all the resources you need to build it to your design and a fortune to spend sailing it when you’re done. The special mission

is not part of that. It's just what its name implies, something special, an experiment that you will take part in, mainly because you happen to be in Fiji. Perfectly safe. Accept it as is, or we find a more suitable candidate."

"Yeah, right," I say, "number two on your list."

What if the boat part of this, at least, is real? It's true – I do have nothing to lose. I lean forward. "Okay. I will try and build this boat. If it works, you'll tell me about this mission and I'll decide then whether I'm going." And given his quick nod, I add, "And I get to keep the boat, either way."

"Done," he says.

He laughs at the surprise on my face.

I sip coffee and look around, sip some more. I turn to him, "Tell me something, Admiral. Does this mission start off with a token of faith?"

His smile broadens. "Following the cardinal rule – going for the money. Ah, yes. We are prepared to offer an upfront enlistment fee. I have it with me. It's fifty thousand dollars."

I almost drop the cup. He sits back, smiling widely. Something serious is going down and I'm right in it. His arrogance, his accurate assessment of my despondent state, and that smile all combine to ignite my anger. My face burns and I lean forward, "So what is this?" waving my hand between us. "Breakfast and a date? Is that why I feel I'm about to be fucked royally?"

A deep flush replaces the smile. He pushes back his chair. Seconds pass and then he breathes deeply. He leans forward, scrapes his chair back in and gulps coffee. "You insolent little prick. You have no idea whom you're dealing with. Are you interested or not? Because I still have some questions to ask. I came here to interview you for a job. But I am growing steadily more inclined to go and find number two – he's actually already in the Navy."

I smile and nod, casually dismissing his anger. "Relax, Admiral.

I'm simply trying to figure out you and your mission. Why am I your one in a million man?"

He shakes his head and then smiles grimly. "Let me warn you, Rick. If you join the Navy, I may just reinstate flogging." He slides his briefcase from under his legs, removes a folder and leafs through it to stop at a page. "Yes, here it is. You have been sailing since you were nineteen, right? That's eleven years during which you have single-handed over a hundred thousand miles in various boats, all called *Bit-by-Bit*. Why the same name for all your boats, not even a number to qualify them?"

"The number is implied by the name, each boat being a little better than its predecessor."

"I see, a kind of continuously improving boat. Right then. Your two years with the Canadian Navy - any military experience other than that?"

"No."

"But you can handle a gun, right? Your target scores on the range are impressive."

"I've fired a few rounds."

"Ever killed a man?"

"No." And I can't resist adding, "Not yet."

He looks up from his notes with a half-smile. "So what were the personal reasons you left the navy for?"

"As it may happen again if I join your navy, I'll tell you. I slugged my superior officer. I was asked to resign."

He laughs. "From my brief exposure to you this morning, I knew you had a problem with authority." He shakes his head, and then his eyes harden as he says quietly, "And if you ever so much as touch me, you're dead."

I say just as quietly, "Your dorsal fin is showing. I think you

mean court-martialed, don't you?"

"I know what I mean," he says, consulting his notes. He looks up. "We know that you were one of the youngest students to graduate from the University of Toronto. We know you majored in the sciences. What we don't know is how much you know about history - in particular, the Peninsula War, Napoleon and Wellington?"

"You guys check me out for six months and there's something you don't know about me?"

"A well-prepared interviewer knows the answers to most of his questions, Joshua. But I guess you've never been on the other side of the desk, have you?"

I shrug. "The only history I know anything about is old ships and the nineteenth-century Navy."

"Really? How fortunate," he says. "In that case, have you heard of a Navy officer called Captain Lord Thomas Cochrane?"

"He was a contemporary of Nelson's. He was an incredible fighting captain."

"Excellent!" he says, smiling. "Not many people have heard of him. What about a Doctor James Guthrie?"

And in response to my shake of the head, "A ship called *HMS Impérieuse*?"

"Sure. She was Cochrane's ship."

I pause. "Why you asking all this?"

"A wise man learns from history. I'm sure we could learn something about your goal from The Navy's days of sail."

I nod. "Perhaps, but who was Doctor Guthrie - was he in the Navy too?"

"Guthrie was the surgeon on board *Impérieuse*. I was just curious as to whether you knew any of this. You said you were interested in that era's Navy." He glances at his notes again. "You seem to know a great deal

about a lot of things. How is that possible?”

“I have a good memory.”

“But that doesn’t explain the breadth of your knowledge, does it?”

“I read a lot,” I say as the waiter places our food in front of us. I haven’t had breakfast in a while and I pay attention. In deference to Cassius daintily forking portions of bacon into his mouth, I cut my toast into squares and use them on a fork to mop up my egg yolks. He dabs his lips with the napkin, sits back and asks, “Have you heard of the Santa Maria Inn, in San Sebastian?”

He nods in response to my *No* and says, “How many languages do you speak?”

“English, French and a little Spanish.”

“How little is a little? Can you make yourself understood?”

“That depends on the circumstances,” I say smiling.

He writes something on his papers and says, “You were orphaned at ten. Do you have any relatives? Close friends?”

In the tortured howl of that storm, reviewing my life, I judged it empty: a meaningless string of years in which my only long-term relationship was with my boat. And now, feeling sentenced to solitary forever, he dismisses my pain in three careless sentences. I lean in and snap, “Why?”

He lifts his head from his notes, and smiles. “Just a routine question – we need to know how to address your mail for you, who you will allow to call you, while you’re at sea. That sort of thing.”

“There’s no one special in my life.” I say softly, staring at a spot on the table. I look up after a time and he’s sitting back, smiling slightly. But he has not answered my earlier question. “Admiral. You still haven’t told me why you love me so. Why am I your only candidate?”

Cassius says, waving his arms expansively, “Not many sailors have your knowledge of technology and boat design, or your experience

at single-handing. You're good with a gun and then especially, there's your Black Belt, and...." He turns his head and stares silently out the green archway.

This sounds like action. I faced that decision when I signed up before, but just what mission does Cassius have up his sleeve? Am I going to end up hanging from the yardarm?"

Cassius signals for the bill.

I finish my coffee. I can get by here working on other people's boats until I can crew on a passage to Chile. Working and building the boat there, I can be afloat in about eight years. The prize of a lifetime may not be worth a life, but I can't face the future thinking I didn't try for it.

"Okay, Admiral. I'm in. What happens next?"

He laughs and slaps the table. He produces a manila envelope and a sheet of paper and pen from his briefcase. He hands me the paper and pen, and says, "Sign here. The money is in this envelope." He picks up the envelope, slits the end with a knife, extracts a rubber-banded sheaf of US currency, and fans through what could be a fortune, or nothing. He returns the money to the envelope.

The sheet of paper is a receipt. I sign it and give it back. I shake his clammy hand, take the envelope and leave him sitting there. With the prize of my spare-no-expense boat, he knows he'll see me again.

I return to my rented room, sit on the bed, open the envelope and count the money: \$50s and \$20s, all there. A single sheet of paper contains my orders, and there's a smaller envelope and a book.

The orders confirm the details that Cassius outlined, and end with: *You are hereby ordered to proceed with all possible haste to Portsmouth Naval Research Center. You will contact Admiral Stoke at the Hamilton Inn on December 3rd 2009, at 13:00, and inform him of your travel arrangements.* They are signed *C-in-C, PNRC, Admiral Edmund Clayton Stoke.*

The envelope contains an open first class airline ticket to London

in my name. The book is *Autobiography of a Seaman*, by Admiral Lord Thomas Cochrane. The inside cover bears a neat handwritten inscription: *Welcome Aboard! Lieutenant Ses Lorimer*. I look forward to reading it, as I have read a biography of Thomas's life but not his own words.

I walk to a bank and deposit most of the cash. I walk to Allan's Marina and tell him I'll finish the job I'm working on, before leaving.

December 4, 2009

I ride the bus to the airport and board a plane at 20:00, bound for London. The flight rises into the air and we climb north and east. I look down on the sea, thinking of *Bit-by-Bit*. I stayed with her, of course: even upside down she floated, and she was heavier and more stable than the liferaft. I tied myself into the starboard bilge and hung there, waiting for the storm to blow itself out. As the wind died to a gale, we hit the reef. The mast caught it first, and I just had time to deploy the liferaft and dinghy before she poled on top of the coral and shattered into pieces.

With a sigh, I take Admiral Lord Thomas Cochrane's autobiography from my bag and read the introduction: *The Autobiography of a Seaman is the simple title for the story of a very complex man. The Tenth Earl of Dundonald, better known to history as Captain Lord Cochrane, was one of the finest British naval commanders in an age that produced many outstanding sea officers.*

Some time later, I reluctantly put the book down as the flight attendant hands me my meal. I sit back and enjoy the rare roast beef and an Australian Cabernet. What would Thomas say, if he was magically beamed off the deck of *Speedy* in 1801, to up here, in seat 5B next to me? In a ship carrying four hundred people at six hundred miles per hour, thirty thousand feet above sea-level.

It's the rule of ten times: average speeds for sailboats are around six knots, for cars around sixty MPH and for airplanes about six hundred. The past two centuries have each boosted the speed of travel ten times, but the price of this progress is the power required to travel faster. It's greed in a new guise: hidden behind the rush that speed induces we all want to achieve more, get more, see more. It's technology's empowerment that's the real rush.