



Napoleon's Gambit

A novel by Eric Goldman

Sailing through history ...
to commit the perfect crime

Chapter Two

June 4, 1813

The tide turned and the sea ceased to move, reflecting the sky so clearly that the world turned upside down: the late afternoon sun hanging in a blue bowl. At that instant, *HMS Impérieuse* cast off her last mooring line, and the single command, “Make sail,” was heard.

The courses, topsails and topgallants billowed out and the sheets on all heaved taut. She leaned to the wind, heeled five degrees. Her rudder bit and she turned. One hundred and forty men hauled ropes, trimmed sheets and turned her wheel, and *Impérieuse* drifted away from her berth.

Captain Lord Thomas Cochrane and Doctor James Guthrie stood at the quarterdeck’s leeward rail, watching Plymouth dwindle in

the distance. The Pilgrim's Church spire blurred against the masts of the trabaccolos, men-of-war and merchantmen moored in the harbor.

More than six feet tall, Thomas towered over his friend. His gold epaulettes flashed in the sunlight as he leaned against the rail. He regarded James with affection. His friend's smile hovered, yet regret tinged his eyes a darker gray. "You give the appearance, James, of a man who spent his few days of shore leave wisely."

James smiled ruefully. "I scribbled a note to Mary, when we spoke the mail packet off the Azores a few weeks ago. Mary and Sean have recently spent time at her father's estate in Ireland – near Dublin, as you know. It was fortunate that she had planned a trip to London before my news. They arrived at the flat off Sloan Square within an hour of my alighting from our cab."

James looked back towards Plymouth. Twilight darkened the view, and lights twinkled along the shoreline. "My wife is well, my son is well, and thus, I am well -." He trailed off, conscious that Thomas had no similar tale to relate – his family lived in Scotland. "But you, Thomas, your brow is furrowed. May I assume your concern, and your rapid request for me to return to duty, are in connection with your summons to the Admiralty?"

"Aye. We are bound for Rochefort. To attack the French Fleet in Aix Roads. And a tedious and politically troubled time we will have of it."

"May I beg of you, dear, to tell me what transpired?"

"Aye," said Thomas, pausing as *Impérieuse* rounded Plymouth Head and headed south and east, towards the French Coast. He looked up to fix his position. Vega, brilliantly blue above, and orange Arcturus to the north and west. They were on course. Unfettered by the land, the wind and swell freshened. *Impérieuse* danced over the seas, a thrumming vibration under their feet. The First Lieutenant softly ordered more sail, and men swarmed aloft. Canvas fell, sheets tightened and *Impérieuse* heeled several

strakes. The water's passage along the hull sang out louder, and the wind's note rose a pitch.

Thomas returned his gaze to his friend. "Aye, James. I will. But perhaps this discussion would flow better with a glass of wine. Will you join me in my cabin? I will not be a minute - I must speak with Mister Brown."

A burst of spray swept the deck and James pulled his cloak tighter. "An idea with much merit," he said. "I will rouse out Kipper and light him along with the toasted cheese." He walked aft, pausing to speak to men clustered in groups along the rail. At the Captain's cabin, he acknowledged the sentry's greeting and told him to summon Kipper, the steward.

Meanwhile, Thomas crossed the deck. The First Lieutenant, Sam Brown, was deep in conversation with Midshipman Mapleton, the officer of the watch. Mr. Brown was stocky, with brown hair and eyes, and about twenty years old. He wore his hat just like his Captain, in the modern style, fore and aft instead of side to side. They saluted. The officers made to surrender the windward side to their Captain, but Thomas motioned them to stay. "No, Mister Brown. Keep the ship. I will be going to my cabin in a moment."

Thomas glanced around the deck and up at the rig. *Impérieuse's* courses, topsails, topgallants, studdingsails and royals flew majestically. The fifteen knots of wind, acting directly across her starboard quarter on an almost full suite of canvas, thrust her one thousand tons along at twelve knots. Heeled twenty degrees, her cutwater sliced the sea into two waves, which curled up on either side of the ship and raced aft to become the wake.

Thomas, his face flushed with pleasure at his ship and crew's performance, nodded at his Lieutenant. "Well done, Mister Brown."

Mr. Brown smiled, his teeth flashing in the gloom. "Thank-you,

my Lord.”

“Colonel Congreve’s rockets, Mister Brown. I assume they were stowed appropriately? We do not want them igniting prematurely.”

“Aye, my Lord. I personally lashed the chests into the hold. I asked Mister Kedge to keep an eye on them.” Thomas nodded. The gunner was a wise choice.

The glass ran out. The sentry tapped it and called, “Time.”

Mr. Mapleton said, “Make it so,” to the sentry at the bell. The man rapped the hammer against the brass bell. Outside of the Captain’s silverware, the bell was the only object on board allowed a shine, and it gleamed brilliantly in the starlight. A double chime followed by a single: three bells.

Thomas saluted, the officers returned the salute, and Thomas walked aft, towards his cabin. The two helmsmen at the wheel lifted their knuckles to their foreheads, and he nodded and touched his hat. He strode into his cabin and closed the door.

It was like walking into a wooden barrel: oak ribs for hoops, and fir-planked deck and sides curving into the deck above. Aft, near the stern gallery, the two chasers, the two 12 pounder cannons, creaked gently on each roll. James sat, his stockinged feet on the table, his pumps on the floor, reading. He slid his legs off the table on Thomas’s entry and poured wine into two glasses.

Thomas threw his coat onto a chair, unbuckled his sword and hung it on a peg. He kicked off his boots, sat, and raised his glass to James. “To our mission. I see shoals and reefs ahead, James. And they will all be seated around Lord Gambier’s table, while I stand in front and be taught a lesson on Navy protocol. The assembled officers will think I requested this mission. It represents a personal affront. A junior officer leading an attack against a fleet.”

James regarded his friend’s frown. “Come now. Start from the

beginning. You were summoned to the Admiralty.”

“Indeed. To meet with Lord Mulgrave, himself.”

James’s eyebrows rose in surprise, “Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The First Sea Lord. Did you know why your presence was requested?”

Thomas nodded. “The letter stated that the Admiralty Board was considering a plan I submitted some three years ago, outlining an attack on the fleet at Aix Roads.”

Thomas paused. Waiting in the First Lord’s anteroom, he had wondered what his father would say if he saw him seated there. Lord Archibald Cochrane had boxed his son’s ears when Thomas expressed a desire to enlist in the Navy instead of his Majesty’s 104th Regiment. He’d argued with his father for months, until one day Thomas said he could not enjoy a career in which he could not excel. Archibald had relented – he, too, preferred excellence to tradition.

Turning back to James, Thomas smiled, “I was not, as I should say, nervous, waiting in Lord Mulgrave’s anteroom, but I seemed to be there for an eternity.”

James laughed.

“Lord Mulgrave is a civilian,” said Thomas. “Parliament’s attempt to address the corruption in the service. He greeted me civilly enough and came directly to the point. Towards the end of February, a storm struck the coast of Brittany and dispersed Admiral Gambier’s fleet off its blockade at Brest. Eight French ships-of-the-line escaped. Admiral Stopford located the enemy off the south coast of France a few weeks ago. He brought them to action. Despite their favorable odds, the French ran into Rochefort.”

James frowned. In 1798, a French fleet with three thousand soldiers and Napoleon himself on board, escaped the blockade at Brest, and sailed to Egypt. Only Lord Nelson’s brilliant strategy at the Bay of Aboukir prevented Napoleon’s planned invasion. James said, “I presume

there were ships anchored in Rochefort to begin with. What strength is the fleet now?"

"In Aix Roads, the channels leading to the harbor at Rochefort, are eleven ships-of-the-line and four frigates."

James sat up, concern narrowing his eyes. "A fleet of such power could threaten our trade in the West Indies."

"That is precisely what Lord Mulgrave said."

"And presumably, they are again being blockaded?"

Thomas raised his glass. "In their infinite wisdom, the Admiralty appointed the man who lost the fleet in the first place. Admiral Lord Gambier is once again in command of the blockading squadron."

Both men sipped wine. The lamps flickered in the breeze from the open sternlights. The sentry announced Kipper. The door was thrown open in response to Thomas's "Come."

The steward stood in the door, a tray to his shoulder. "Yer toasted cheese, yer honors. Get it while it's 'ot." They licked their lips. Kipper sauntered in and settled the tray with exaggerated care on the table. He handed each man a plate and napkin, saluted and left.

They ate, while Thomas continued. "Lord Mulgrave sent a copy of my plan to Admiral Gambier. Gambier consulted with his senior officers and responded that their opinion of my plan, which called for fire-ships, was discouraging."

A fire-ship was an old hulk, with enough rigging still standing to steer her with the wind from behind. A four-man crew sailed her in under her foremast topsail. She was set on fire as she reached the enemy fleet. Her hold and decks were suitably prepared to ignite and she burned fiercely. The crew leaped into a boat towing astern and rowed off. With the wind blowing from the fire-ship towards the enemy – all the crew needed do, was lay her alongside. The fire-ship ran afoul of an enemy ship and set fire to her. She burned rapidly, her magazine blew, and she set fire to her

neighbors.

“It must be all but impossible to fend off the burning ship, when it is blown against one’s own,” said James. “It does seem the perfect opportunity to maul that cursed Napoleon. Yet, Gambier was reluctant. And we are en route, despite his resistance.”

Thomas nodded. “Aye. Destroying the fleet would be a major strike against the dictator and a much needed victory for The Navy. Lord Mulgrave then did the most extraordinary thing. He handed me Gambier’s letter, to read. I hesitated. The First Sea Lord handing me a senior Admiral’s correspondence, negative to my interests, mark you. Unheard of.”

James smiled. “You read it, of course.”

Thomas grinned and shrugged. “I complied with his order. The letter was the usual prevarication of an officer who did not wish to offend with outright refusal. In it, he said that the operation was ‘*hazardous if not desperate and constitutes a horrible mode of warfare.*’ But his letter also revealed that he has not sounded the approaches to the roads. He contradicted himself concerning the defences of the Citadel on Isle d’ Aix: on one hand they were decrepit and not worthy of concern; on the other, capable of reigning red-hot shot on ships attempting to enter the roads. He has senior men with him too – Admiral Harvey acquitted himself well on the *Téméraire*, fighting alongside Nelson at Trafalgar. Harvey has some extremely strong fighting captains.”

Thomas paused and then explained how he had respectfully suggested to Lord Mulgrave that, if the commanding officers of the blockading squadron believed his plan to be hazardous and horrible, he could not be of service. Mulgrave did not understand why. Thomas said the commander’s commitment to the outcome of a battle was the most important component of any strategy. Mulgrave nodded at this, but said that if the Admiralty approved his plan, Lord Gambier would put it into

effect. The Navy was renowned for following orders, was it not?

“Aye,” said James, nodding. “A civilian would not comprehend that these men have fought their way to their positions – spilled blood to achieve them.” He eyed Thomas’s unhappy face. “What happened then?”

“I told him that the captains of every ship in the fleet were senior to me. Ordering them to execute my plan, after they had labeled it so, would engender great ill feeling. He said that the present circumstances were no time for professional etiquette. The Board was most desirous that the French fleet be destroyed as soon as possible.”

James nodded. “If he believed the Navy would follow the Board’s order, why did he not order Gambier to execute the plan?”

“Gambier’s letter ended with the line, *‘If you mean to do anything of the kind, it should be done with secrecy and quickly.’* It was a masterful stroke. It forced the Admiralty to assign the mission to someone outside of Gambier’s fleet. I tried to persuade Lord Mulgrave by outlining a refinement to my plan, suggesting he order Gambier to execute the plan using it. He told me my plan was excellent; that it stood a good chance of success, but only if I led it. He reminded me that the Channel fleet has not accomplished an action of note since Nelson died at Trafalgar. He ordered me to lose not a moment in joining Gambier’s fleet.”

“Perhaps he did understand, after all,” said James, nodding slowly.

Thomas shook his head. “Understand?”

“That the person leading the attack must be committed to it. Gambier and his officers are not, ergo, you must lead it.”

“You are almost certainly correct.” Thomas laughed ruefully. “But it dawned on me at that moment why I was seated in that most exalted office. If my plan works, the Admiralty, Gambier and his fleet win the glory; if it fails, I am a junior Post-Captain – expendable in the extreme – there are many more captains than ships.”

James smiled grimly. “Aye. But tell me, my friend. What of

Gambier? In your professional opinion, he is obviously incompetent, yet, equally obviously, the Admiralty cherishes him. I trust your opinion of his technical abilities implicitly. Lord Gambier thus must have good connections.”

Thomas laughed. “You are, as usual, right, good Doctor. Perhaps he was once a good seaman, but his connections run to royals. You remember Copenhagen? September 07? Gambier commanded the fleet that bombarded it for three days. He demolished much of the city; civilians were wounded and killed. It was a low point for the service. He appears indecisive these days. His resolve seems to have fled in a fit of conscience. He has become, what in the Navy is called, a tract-man. Does this hold meaning for you?”

“A man devoted to tracts of the bible. A religious man?”

“Just so. He is said to have a staff of men producing fair copies of tracts for circulation amongst the blockading fleet, and woe be the officer who fails his catechisms in front of Admiral Lord Gambier.”

“But, Thomas, for Lord Mulgrave to dispatch you thus, your plan must have impressed him. It seems the perfect opportunity to propel you closer to that Admiral’s flag you so keenly desire.”

Thomas smiled. “Perhaps, but no one loves an upstart.”

James nodded. “Aye, but what of your plan? Are you at liberty to divulge it?”

“It is simple enough: the weather at this time off Rochefort is consistently a strong northeasterly wind, directly into the roads. The dark of the moon is on the thirteenth of this month. I hope to launch a fire-ship attack, along with a new device I wish to try, which I call an exploding-ship.”

“If a fire-ship is set alight, it follows an exploding one is blown up. But in what way does its affect on the enemy differ?”

“I have always believed that the best strategy in war, is to infuse

the enemy with terror. To either paralyze him with fright, or to overwhelm him with such odds in your favor, that he simply gives up. And to strike sheer terror, one needs an initial force far greater than the enemy is accustomed to. This is my exploding-ship. Think of it as a floating bomb.”

James nodded, but his smile faded. “But it is my understanding that one needs a fair number of fire-ships to ensure they find their targets. These exploding-ships of yours – are they not difficult to build? Require much in the way of munitions?”

“The answer to both your questions is affirmative. But only the first three ships will be exploding variants. The French will assume that the rest, plain fire-ships do you see, are also exploding ones.”

James’s smile lit up his face. He reached across and tapped Thomas’s shoulder. “I am glad we fight on the same side.”

June 8, 1813

“On deck! Sail ho! The Channel Fleet, sir.”

Sam Brown grabbed his telescope, jumped to the mainchains, and climbed the ratlines. He swung himself around the outside of the top, grasped the futtock shrouds, and heaved himself in. Steadying his glass on a topgallant shroud, he gazed at the fleet, riding easily at anchor in Basque Roads. As he watched, the private signal flew from Gambier’s flagship. *Impérieuse* answered with her number. The expected signal rose to the flagship’s masthead and unfurled: *Captain to flagship*.

Mr. Brown leaned down to order the officer of the watch to summon the Captain, just as Thomas appeared on deck. From Sam’s vantage point, Thomas, in his number one uniform of white pants and dark blue coat, was a blue hat striding on twinkling boots, propelled by the heavy sword swinging from his Captain’s waist.

The boys in their white gloves handed Thomas over the side

into the lowered boat. The shrill scream of the Bosun's pipe echoed in Thomas's ears as they rowed across the windy sea. A strong northeasterly - what Thomas wanted for his attack, of course, although he could wish it were not wetting his best uniform so vigorously, just now.

Piped aboard the flagship with equal ceremony, Thomas made his way to Admiral Lord Gambier's cabin on the upper deck. The *Caledonia's* 32 pounders curved against her sides. Twice *Impérieuse's* tonnage, she mounted one hundred and twenty guns. Two sentries guarded the Admiral's door. They announced Thomas and motioned him in.

Gambier, with his desk in the center of the great cabin, leaned back in his chair and regarded Thomas. Gilt chairs around the perimeter of the cabin held the fleet's officers. Thomas stood rooted to the spot, overawed by the tidal wave of gold epaulettes.

His quick glance took in Captains Parker and Seymour, who smiled at him: possible supporters. Seymour had Thomas's *Pallas* now; surely the man would feel something for her previous commander? And Admiral Stopford - with no visible animosity; neutral, perhaps? Not perhaps the shoals he had feared; yet squalls of anger flashed across many of the Captains' faces. Thomas swallowed hard. The sacrificial lamb. He saluted and stepped forward. Eyes cannonaded his back and sides, and he fixed his gaze on Lord Gambier.

The Admiral was a portly man, flabby of face with effeminate features. He wore his wig long and flowing around his shoulders. "Greetings, Lord Cochrane. Please sit. You know the officers present? Would you like a dish of tea or some refreshment?"

Thomas replied that he was comfortable and ready to begin.

Lord Gambier said, “I have received this instruction from their Lords of the Admiralty. Please read it.” He handed the letter across. Aware of the irony of reading the Admiralty’s letter to Gambier, after so recently reading Gambier’s letter to the Admiralty, Thomas did as commanded.

*Admiralty Office,
3rd June, 1813.*

My Lord, - My Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty having thought fit to select Captain Lord Cochrane for the purpose of conducting, under your lordship’s direction, the fire-ships to be employed in the projected attack on the enemy’s squadron off Isle d’ Aix, I have their Lordship’s commands to signify their direction to you to employ Lord Cochrane in the above-mentioned service accordingly, whenever the attack shall take place; and I am to acquaint you that the twelve fire-ships, of which you already had notice, are now in the Downs in readiness, and detained only by contrary winds. I am also to acquaint you that the composition for the six transports, sent to your lordship by Admiral Young, and 1000 carcasses for the 18-pounders, will sail in the course of three or four days from Woolwich, to join you off Rochefort.

I have, etc. etc. W.W. Pole

Thomas handed it back to the Admiral who filed it with the paperwork on his desk and said, “Well, Lord Cochrane. Just what is it you propose to do, and in what way do you require the services of the fleet?”

“My Lord. The fire-ships should arrive in a few days. The exploding-ships can be prepared by *Impérieuse*’s crew. On the dark of the moon, four days from now, the fire-ships and exploding-ships will drive the French fleet onto the shore. The next morning, our fleet should sail into

the roads and cannonade the ships where they have been beached, to ensure their destruction.”

Gambier sat back, aghast. “Captain Lord Cochrane. Surely you do not ask for the fleet to sail into Aix Roads? The Citadel will fire red-hot shot on them as they attempt to negotiate the Boyart Shoal.”

Thomas shook his head. “My Lord Gambier. I have sounded the Boyart Shoal previously, and know that there is deep water on the northeast side – deep enough for our ships-of-the-line, my Lord. This channel will put our ships at the extreme edge of the range of the fort’s guns. Is not the loss of one, or perhaps even two ships, worth the annihilation of the French fleet?”

“Dear Lord,” said Gambier, gazing at the deck above his desk, “he speaks of loss of life as a statistic.”

He looked around the great cabin, seeking confirmation from his staff of officers. A murmur ran round the room. At that moment the door crashed open, revealing Admiral Eliab Harvey in full dress uniform. A big man, he loomed in the doorway. “Stand aside,” he yelled at the sentry. “I will have my audience now!”

Harvey strode in and Admiral Lord Gambier pointed to a vacant chair. But Harvey walked to stand with his back to Thomas, in front of the Admiral’s desk. “My Lord Gambier. I have come here to offer my services for this plan to attack the French fleet. A large number of my Captains have volunteered to perform the service. We are of the opinion that our more senior officers can be more effective in this operation, than a junior post captain.”

“Admiral Harvey,” said Gambier placatingly, “while I am sure you are correct in all you say, the Lords of the Admiralty having fixed upon Lord Cochrane to conduct this service, I cannot deviate from their Lordships’ orders.”

Harvey’s face reddened. He stomped his foot and his sword

jingled on its belt. “My Lord!” he shouted. “If I am passed by, and Lord Cochrane or any other junior officer is appointed in preference, I shall immediately desire to strike my flag and resign my commission.”

Gambier shook his head, his wig caressing his shoulder. He held up a hand. “Admiral Harvey – I should be sorry to see you resort to such an extremity. Perhaps we should pray together, that you may see this in the light in which it is intended.”

“Bah,” exploded Harvey, throwing his fist in the air. “Pray! Your standard response to all! I tell you this, Lord Gambier: I have never seen a man more unfit for the command of the fleet! I am tempted to take my flagship into Aix Roads and attack the whole fleet single-handed, while you labor on circulating your tracts, holding your religious exercises. You have neglected your naval duty: you should have been sounding the channels, examining the enemy’s defences and training the gun crews. If Nelson had been here, he would not have anchored in Basque Roads at all, but would have dashed at the enemy at once!”

“I am sorry you should feel this way,” said Gambier, “I ask you please to desist in this line of response.”

“This is not the first time I have been lightly treated,” roared Harvey, “and that my services have not been attended to in the way they deserved - because I am no canting Methodist, no hypocrite, no psalm-singer, and do not cheat old women of their estates by hypocrisy and canting.”

A shocked silence lingered for seconds. Admiral Gambier motioned for a marine. The marine approached Admiral Harvey. “Sir,” he said and inclined his head toward the door. Admiral Harvey glared at Gambier, breathing heavily, his face flushed. With an angry snort, he turned on his heel, brushed past the marine and left the cabin without saluting. The officers gazed around the room, taking in Gambier’s pale face leaning on his hands. Without words, they stood and dismissed

themselves.

Thomas was rowed back to *Impérieuse* in his launch, conscious of the resentful eyes of the crews and officers on the ships anchored in Basque Roads. Their sails furled, they waited the next tract or religious service, while he and his ship prepared for action.

“Mister Brown,” he said, back on board *Impérieuse*. “We will weigh and sail in to Aix Roads. I wish to take a closer look at what Admiral Allemande has prepared, against an attack.”

“Aye, my Lord. Weigh anchor and sail in for a look.”

The Lieutenant turned to the Bosun and said, “Weigh anchor.” The Bosun’s pipe shrilled. Men ran to the capstan, lifted a bar from the rack and inserted it into the slot; the boys nipped the messenger to the rode, and a man leapt to the center of the capstan with his fiddle already sounding. *Heave ho, heave ho*, the men called in time, pushing the capstan round and round. The rode tightened and pulled clear of the water, and the ship moved towards the hook. When she was directly over the anchor, *Up and down*, came the call, and when the anchor had been catted and fished, *Anchor’s aweigh*.

Lieutenant Brown said, “Make sail,” to the Bosun. His pipe screeched. *Impérieuse’s* crew let fall the canvas and trimmed the sheets. Her wake trilled along her side as she gathered way.

Thomas ordered Sam Brown to tack back and forward, just out of range of the batteries mounted high on the Citadel, while sounding the channel in front of the Boyart Shoal. He ascended to the foremast top and, riding the ship’s movements on the balls of his feet, rested his telescope against the topgallant mast.

Up forward near the bow, Midshipman Marryat stood poised on the leeward rail. He was sixteen, had been at sea for four years, and he loved throwing the lead, sounding the depth of water below the ship. He rode the rail in the spray of the ship’s headlong passage, balancing with

youthful ease. A coiled line hung from his left hand, knotted at intervals of six feet. The line led to his right hand, where eighteen inches of it hung down to end in a lump of lead. He swung the lead in a circle, relaxed his grip, and the lead arced away from the ship, plunged into the sea and the line ran through his fingers until it stopped. He hauled it back aboard, counting knots. "By the mark," he shouted, "seven fathoms and one half, sir." He examined the lump of tallow on the end of the lead and called, "Sandy bottom, sir."

Midshipman Mapleton acknowledged this with a muffled cry, extracted his pencil from his mouth and called again. "Seven and one half. Sand," and wrote this in the log.

A gun fired in the Citadel above: the deep crump of a big bore cannon. The shot howled in the air, the note slithering up the scale as it approached. The crew of *Impérieuse* paid no heed, merely looking up to mark the range. The red-hot shell exploded in a cloud of steam and water, a cable's length off their larboard bow. Thomas smiled. Here, on the northern edge of the channel, the ship was out of range of the Citadel's guns. And the shoal was still deep enough for a ship-of-the-line's draft.

He looked through his telescope. Off to larboard, was the Isle d'Aix, and behind it, peeked the mainland's point. The river Charente flowed between the mainland and Isle Madam, and the Palles Shoals' small islands. The roads into the harbor led between the Boyart Shoal and the Isle d'Aix. Beyond the island, the channels broadened to become the river's delta. Three rows of ships were anchored in the roads, within the Citadel's arc of fire.

Thomas smiled wryly. He recognized the *Calcutta*, anchored conspicuously in sight of the harbor mouth. An East Indiaman captured by the French in 1805. A grimace of disgust replaced the smile. The British Ensign flew from under her quarter gallery. In this position, the flag received the discharge from the Captain's private head, each time

he relieved himself. He snapped the telescope shut and stared across at *L'Ocean*, the fleet's flagship, his lips twisted into a thin line.

He settled himself against the mast, and resumed his study of the anchored ships. Four frigates formed the front line, moored side-by-side. Behind them, lay five line-of-battle ships in a row, with six more behind them. Each ship faced into the wind. The ships were exposed to a fire-ship attack. Yet, something was amiss. Their formation was too vulnerable.

Thomas cast his telescope towards the shoreline on the starboard side of the road, up towards the highest point of the Boyart Shoal. Sweeping along the low-lying rock, his telescope passed over it before he realized its significance. A pile of rocks rose in an unnatural tower at the edge of the sea: wooden tubs filled with stones, supporting a heavy cable. A thirty-one inch cable, at least, and it disappeared into the sea about ten feet offshore. There could be no doubt. Following the cable's line in the sea was a current break all the way across the roads. The Admiral had suspended a boom across the sea. A cable of that strength, no doubt supported by spars, yards, yet more tubs of stone, would trap a fire-ship out here, in front of the roads. The ship would burn to a cinder and not reach her target.

Now he understood the feeling of disquiet when looking at the ships. He focused his telescope on their inviting lines. Yes, they were anchored more than one hundred and seventy yards apart, to reduce the risk posed by a fire-ship attack. And the four frigates in front guarded the boom.

He glanced up towards the Isle d'Aix, focusing his telescope on the fort. As expected, a battery of thirty guns lined the south wall. Long 32 pounders and mortars. He looked at the docks at the Citadel's foot. A host of gunboats and assorted craft tied to the quays: to patrol the boom, night and day. The movements of the few gunboats on the water now

made sense, they were sailing the outside edge of the boom, while keeping a wary eye on *Impérieuse*.

June 9, 1813

Once again, Thomas rowed across to the flagship to meet with Admiral Gambier. The great cabin seemed empty with only an aide, the admiral's secretary and a few midshipmen present. The mission being reduced in importance.

After the usual preliminaries, Lord Gambier said, "Lord Cochrane. Please begin."

"My Lord. I reconnoitered the roads again last night. Not only is the anchorage susceptible to attack, but the channel has not silted up and remains deep enough to allow the fleet's passage. And this passage is out of range of the Citadel's guns, my Lord. Their shots fell a cable length away."

"Lord Cochrane. Perhaps the wind will blow a different way. One red hot shot into one of these exploding-ships, as you call them, and you will be blown into God's Kingdom."

Thomas waved his hand in negation. "My Lord. My soundings revealed there is more than enough draft for a ship-of-the-line. And this in a channel which lies at the extreme range of the Citadel's guns, sir. Our losses will be acceptable. We will accomplish the Admiralty's goal - the destruction of the French Atlantic fleet."

Gambier examined his desk and gazed around the cabin. He looked at Thomas.

"Lord Cochrane. I pray you are right. But I cannot in all conscience order the fleet into such a perilous position. The fleet and I will remain anchored here in Basque Roads."

Thomas held his gaze to a few inches above Gambier's head,

breathing deeply. “Well, my Lord. If the fleet will not assist in this attack, may I at least have the support of three frigates?”

Gambier relaxed slightly in his chair. A few ships presented a more acceptable risk. A smile fluttered briefly. “For what purpose do you require the frigates?”

“The first will be used to launch a diversion. We will commence a cannonade of the Citadel at the time we launch the attack. The other two will serve as beacons, my Lord. Lighthouses, if you will. To mark the entrance to the channel.”

“I would have thought they would see the channel for themselves, Lord Cochrane.”

“Admiral Gambier, sir,” said Thomas, his cheeks flushing, “it will be dark. They will not see their hands in front of their faces. Now, sir, if I may? I respectfully suggest that we no longer wait the arrival of the fire-ships from the Downs, but instead use the transports I see anchored amongst the fleet. We must strike in the darkness, my Lord, for the full effects of my plan to work.”

Gambier frowned at his desk for some time. He looked up at Thomas. “Let me be clear, Lord Cochrane. The Admiralty has ordered me to assist you as I see fit. You shall thus have your transports and your three frigates. But none of the crews of these vessels are to accompany you on your fire-ships, on the night of the attack. If you wish to proceed with this foolhardy venture, you will risk only your own ship and crew.”

Thomas pondered these statements on the way back to *Impérieuse* in his launch. Gambier was co-operating only to the extent that ensured he would not be found at fault by the Admiralty. But he had not promised the fleet’s ships-of-the-line. If the fire-ships did not burn the fleet, if the fleet merely ran aground, it would be re-floated.

On reaching *Impérieuse*, he summoned the Carpenter to his cabin. Mr. Lamb was slim, whiskered and gray. Thomas sat him down,

gave him a cider, and placed a sheaf of notes in front of him.

“Mister Lamb. I give you the task of building the fire-ships from the transports. We will need twelve ships. You will speak to Mister Brown and pick your men. The ships must be ready for action three nights hence. One of the ships in our fleet has a store of turpentine. You will ask Purser to put in a request. If any person raises so much as an eyebrow, you will refer them to Admiral Lord Gambier. And Chips, send your best mate to see me. I have three ships of my own that I will be converting. Your best mate and a crew of ten men, too.”

“Aye, my Lord,” said the Carpenter and walked away, unhappy at losing his mate at a time of sore need. His place was taken five minutes later by a younger version of himself – a man of similar build and height and with whiskers of black hair.

“You sent fer me, me Lord?” He touched his knuckle to his forehead and bowed his head.

“Aye. Miller. Come in. Sit. Take a look at these drawings, now.”

The man shuffled up to the table, his head down, and dusted his canvas trousers with his hat before he sat. He tentatively pulled the sheaf of papers round and bent over them. His attitude of deference softened as the plan caught his attention. His finger traced the spaces between the ribs and hull planks, and the sole, all filled with logs to render it more rigid. He peered at the crevices along the ribs, between the beams and the keel and the sole, stuffed with material to make it solid.

Thomas let him examine the diagram, and then pointed at the hull. “As you can see, you are building a bomb which can be sailed in close to the enemy. To increase the force of the explosion outwards, we must make the hull as stiff as possible. Do you follow?”

“Aye, sir. I see barrels of gunpowder ‘ere, sir. You wish it all to explode upwards as much as possible.”

“Very good, Miller.”

The man smiled up in delight, nodding, and Thomas continued. “Not all, but a great deal. Some of it must go downwards to destroy the boom. But this is a good start. As you can see, on top of this stiff platform we lash a large number of water and spirit casks, into which we will empty fifteen hundred barrels of powder.”

The carpenter gasped in surprise, as the diagram showed only a few barrels. Thomas tapped the paper. “The casks are to be stood on end, the whole to be bound together and lashed as firmly as possible. And on top of this round, this charge - if you follow me - we place the shot or shell. Some three thousand hand-grenades and several hundred artillery shells.” Thomas restrained a smile at the look of incredulity on the carpenter’s face. “Imagine a giant mortar in your mind, Miller, and you will do no wrong.”

“Aye, me Lord,” he said, staring at Thomas. He rose slowly to his feet and touched his forehead with his knuckle. Shaking his head - the carpenter left to convert the transport ships into an exploding form.

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A little after sunrise, Mr. Lamb and Captain Lord Cochrane stood on the quarterdeck of one of the converted transports. Thomas inspected the ship, nodding, as Mr. Lamb said, “As you can see, my Lord; the rags, the turpentine, the pitch on the decks, the ropes to the rigging, and the fuse just here at the wheel, are as you wished. We tried to ensure that the stern didn’t go too quickly, my Lord. If you tie the boat to the taffrail here, you will have a good chance at leaping clear when the time comes. But, my Lord, I am sorry to say, that there are only eight ships. The Admiral refused us any more transports.”

Thomas waved his hand, dismissing the man’s concern. “Never mind the other four ships, Chips. We will have to manage with what we

have. Extra rations of rum for you and your men, you have done well.”

“Aye, aye, sir!” The Carpenter smiled and touched his hat. They dropped into the waiting boat and returned to *Impérieuse*. Thomas climbed her topside, urged on by the smell of bacon and coffee wafting from his cabin. He crossed the quarterdeck, ducked under the poop’s beams and hurried in.

James sat at the table, reading, according to the gold lettering on the book’s spine, ‘*Diseases of Seamen.*’ He leaned back in his chair, his frame curved to its base and spine, his left hand holding a china coffee cup. He raised it as Thomas entered. “There you are. I hope you don’t mind, but I ate. I was careful to leave more than my share, as compensation for my lack of manners.”

Thomas smiled, helping himself to eggs, bacon, coffee and toast. “Thankee kindly. I am fair famished.” He sat. The northeasterly had increased in strength and the swell was rolling and pitching *Impérieuse* as she tugged at her anchor. He curled his legs around the feet of the chair, pushed the balls of his feet against the deck to lock himself in place, wedged his napkin between his cup and plate and the table’s fiddle, and ate with concentration. Finally, he leaned back in his chair, sipped from his coffee and looked at James.

“If I were to hazard a guess,” said James, regarding the gleam in his friend’s eyes, “you are ready for the attack?”

Thomas laughed. “It would appear I am an easy read. At least, good Doctor, to your eye. Yes, to your question. I could wish for more fire-ships, and while I’m whistling my wind away, I could wish for assistance from the fleet, but I am ready. The weather promises -.”

The sentry interrupted to announce Midshipman Mapleton. He entered, saluted, removed his hat, and held it against his side, squishing its top into a bulge. “My Lord,” he said. “Twelve sail have been sighted. The fire-ships, from the Downs. I thought you might wish to know, my Lord.

They should make arrival within two hours.”

Thomas smiled and pushed back his chair. He threw his napkin to the table with a flourish. “Excellent news, Mister Mapleton.” Noting the young man’s gaze fixed on the platter, he added, “A rasher of bacon for the walk back to the quarterdeck?”

“Thank-you, my Lord.” He scooped a rasher, returned his hat to his head, saluted and left.

James laughed, “Did you see now, the way he used his left-hand to snatch the bacon, leaving his right to deal with the hat and salute? You would think he had practice. But listen, dear. Is this not what you wished for, more fire-ships? Perhaps you may yet gain your battleships.”

But Thomas was already reaching for his hat and ordering his launch to take him to the flagship.