



Napoleon's Gambit

A novel by Eric Goldman

Sailing through history ...
to commit the perfect crime

Chapter Six

December 5, 2010

A mist hangs outside my cabin's panoramic porthole. The Old Dockyard's floodlit bits of warship float like islands on an ocean of night. My alarm beeps, but I silence it quickly: I've been awake, planning.

The instruments above my bunk indicate 3° C outside, rain on the way but none yet falling, a light wind from the west. I switch off the heater in my cabin, slide to the foot of the king-size bunk, and walk on the teak and holly sole to the head.

Through the salon door, beyond the cockpit, a red tinge highlights *Victory's* rigging against the Old Dockyard, and rain-swollen clouds press on the naval base.

I walk to the nav station and run through BeeBee's final set of tests. It feels strange to be putting to sea with no diesel or propane. I

start both motors, check their instruments and return to the dock. Retie the mooring lines so I can release them from the deck. I climb aboard and back *Bit-by-Bit's* starboard side away from the dock. Stabilize her against the wind and current, release the lines and stow everything, ready for sea.

We turn slowly towards the channel. The motors, ticking over at one thousand RPM, propel us at three knots.

I look up to see Gosport drifting by on the starboard side and take a long look round, at Pompey. I haven't spent this long in one place in years. The idea of roots, something more permanent than an always moving home, appeals.

The Square Tower drifts into view and suddenly the subject of my thoughts is there before me. Ses stands on the Saluting Platform, waving a cardboard poster: *Come back a hero*. Beneath it is a heart with our initials.

I laugh out loud, put both hands to my mouth and blow her a kiss. She waves and blows it back. Our second kiss, only slightly more fleeting than the first.

I will miss the way her smile lifts my mood, the pleasure when she laughs at my jokes, how she tweaks my intellect. We have talked almost non-stop when together, yet it's the shared quiet moments that I seem to treasure most. She touches her scar sometimes. In those moments she looks so vulnerable that I feel a protective surge of responsibility. In a strange way I envy her for having something physical to remind her of her father.

BeeBee and I motor slowly past the line of markers to the Isle of Wight, and beyond, to the Atlantic. We pass the Lizard, and I key the course into the autopilot. BeeBee turns westwards and I hoist the spinnaker and see it puff into a perfect curve. Switch off both engines, readjust the spinny's guys and sheets to compensate, and we are on our

way.

This is the long-awaited moment at the start of each voyage: the sudden cessation of the motors' whines and vibrations make their lack seem blissful, and then it's just *Bit-by-Bit* and me, and the wind and water. The two of us gliding effortlessly along, forever. It would be perfect, but for the pang of not seeing Ses.

December 9, 2010

Fifty miles over the horizon, off the port bow, Portugal is yielding to Spain. The wind is a southwesterly gale, steady at forty knots. We run before the wind, flying the spinnaker only. We are hitting twenty-four knots surfing down the waves, and a broach will kill me. It happens quickly enough when it does. Imagine this: the boat yaws a little to one side and I correct it but turn the helm too much. She turns back too rapidly, the keels bite and she veers abruptly. She continues traveling in a straight line and she flips, throwing me ahead of the boat and then comes down on top of me, exploding into pieces as she smacks me into the sea.

So I pay attention. Compensating the risk of broaching is the ride: a sixty-five foot long surfboard, ninety feet tall and thirty feet wide, catching a thirty-foot wave at almost thirty miles an hour. The rudders' rooster tails arc up behind us, almost as high as the wave that bears down on the sterns. It grows darker in the cockpit, and the wave scoops us onto its trough. Ahead, the sky shoots upwards as we tilt forward, my body presses down on my legs and we zoom thirty feet up in two seconds. And at the top, for that all too brief, magical pause, we hang on the curl in a state of perfect grace. The sea stretches ahead, an infinite series of crests below swirling clouds. The wind roars through the rigging and the bow waves are twin curls of green, white-flecked foam. I feel like we are flying. Then the wave surges past, and I see only sky. My stomach rises to my

chest, and we fall thirty feet into the dark valley.

The wind-steering system is not suitable when running downwind like this. I hit the auto button when I grow tired, and *Bit-by-Bit* takes over. She makes smaller adjustments than I do to maintain course, her compass more sensitive to changes in yaw, and her hydraulic steering stronger and faster than my arms. The system seems tireless, but the electric current draw is almost thirty amps. I keep a careful eye on the fuel cells. I will have to take over manually, to let the hydrogen spirals replace the energy. When it's overcast, they can't cope. I set the egg timer for fifteen minutes (at this speed, we could encounter something sooner than usual), and grab some sleep, to ready myself for a spell at the wheel.

December 23, 2010

We sail past the Saudi – Yemen border around mid-afternoon. A half-hour before dusk, fourteen miles off Yemen's coast, *Bit-by-Bit's* WatchMate system alerts me to two radar targets.

They travel at twenty-six knots, one behind the other, versus our thirteen knots. We are being rapidly overhauled. I switch off *Bit-by-Bit's* interior and navigational lights and close the hydrogen spirals' carbon-fiber covers. Then I cinch a safety belt around my waist, sling my stabilized binoculars around my neck, and climb the mast's built-in steps to near its head. The sun's lower edge bleeds into the sea, and red streaks the sky.

The wind is stronger ninety feet up, unfettered by the sea and *Bit-by-Bit*. I hook on my safety belt, and steady the glasses. Two large, black-hulled Zodiac inflatables appear. The lead boat is thirty feet long and carries eight men, the one behind a little smaller with five more. A radar arch and dome spans the big boat's stern and this is how they

found me. Twin outboards of around three hundred horsepower each, thirteen men - they are not risking being outnumbered by the crew and passengers of a sailing cat. The man in the front of the larger boat has a rifle slung over his shoulder, with a pistol and sheathed knife in his belt. Still eight miles off, they will be alongside in less than half an hour.

I climb down. *Bit-by-Bit* has one cannon: a genuine muzzle-loader which fires a two-ounce shot from its a half-inch bore and foot-long barrel. Made of brass, the gun is mounted on a piece of oak and weighs a few pounds. It's a conversation piece. I use it for signaling my arrival into port sometimes, by firing a wad without the shot. Its range is less than one hundred feet and its shot will probably not penetrate the Rubber Ducky, but it does make a loud bang and noticeable flash. I load a double charge of powder, push home a wad, prime the fuse and leave it ready to fire on the cockpit table. Why waste one of the precious balls of brass on men who lack any?

I assemble the M-85 sniper's rifle, check its action and load its magazine, and then do the same for the Beretta shotgun and the Fabrique Nationale Five-seveN pistol. The full moon rises on the starboard side, and a golden beam lights the sea where its tip rides. I can see nothing of the boats with my eyes, but the radar shows them clearly: still in single file, approaching from astern, now four-point-one kilometers away.

"BeeBee," I say out loud. "Change course twenty degrees to starboard."

"Aye sir," she replies, "20° to starboard. Now steering 140°. Trimming sheets, sir."

I replace the standard sight on the M-85 with the infrared, don the nightvision goggles, adjust the aperture and focus. The lead boat suddenly leaps into view. They are still on track, as expected with their radar unit. My course change puts them between the moon and me, however. I am silhouetted, and they lit. The leader now stands in the bow, his rifle still

slung, his hands holding the top of the fiberglass above the black rubber hull. The man's swarthy face is capped by a bandana. His heavy woolen garment streams out behind him and the men on either side stand well back from its whipping ends.

I point the cannon in their general direction, look away so the flash won't overpower the nightvision, and pull the lanyard. The gun roars. The leader crouches behind the gunnel, his rifle unslung. But they haven't turned back. They still race across the sea, now less than a kilometer away.

*Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility:
But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood...*

Ses read this to me in one of our history lessons. Taking off the nightvision, I pick up the M-85, leave the cockpit and climb the steps cut into the coach at the base of the mast. Kneeling on the roof, I open the rifle's tripod and rest its legs on the carbon-fiber covers of the hydrogen spirals. Switch on the sight, set the distance to seven hundred and fifty meters and settle down behind the rifle. I have never pointed a gun at a man before, but the Bard is, as always, right: stiffen the sinews – it's them or me. In the infrared sight, the leader's cloak and the black hull are invisible, but the top half of his body is now a red figure. I squeeze the trigger. The report is about the same volume as the cannon, but a much shorter duration; a vocal hammer of a punch that launches the bullet at nearly two thousand miles an hour. White light flares in the sight as the radar dome explodes and leader's head disappears behind the hull.

But still they come. I set the scope to five hundred and aim for

the area two feet below the lead man's hands. Five hundred meters and closing fast. I breathe, hold it, and wait until *Bit-by-Bit* rolls the rifle's cross hairs over the target. I squeeze the trigger. The man leaps back from the gunnel and his howl of pain rings out. The boat's bow plunges into the water at almost thirty knots and it flips into a perfect broach. The smaller craft narrowly misses it and I exchange the riflescope for the nightvision. The pirates are now stationary about six hundred meters away and falling back as *Bit-by-Bit* and I sail on. The big boat is no longer visible and the little one sinks lower in the water each time they haul in a comrade.

I correct course and sail on, the radar revealing the remaining boat begin its return journey to base. I pour a glass of wine and raise it. "To Captain Swarthy: I hope you lead a long life and that your leg hurts every time it rains."

March 4, 2011

Before dawn, we skirt the northern end of Ceva-I-Ra, the reef that lies two hundred and fifty miles south west of Viti Levu, the largest of Fiji's islands. The light southeast trades of around ten knots push us in a broad reach at eight knots. Suva, the capital, is about fifty miles ahead and we should reach it in less than seven hours.

The fact that BeeBee again found the desired waypoint is no longer a surprise, although soon we have to do it without a GPS. But I enjoy seeing it proved again, good old reliable science ticking away. This time, it's different. I want Ses. Making a landfall with someone after an ocean crossing, is a way to broaden the experience in one's mind by seeing it from two perspectives.

At midday the black winches are hot enough to almost burn my hands. I smell damp vegetation and earth. Mount Tomaniivi, the tallest mountain at over four thousand feet, appears in the binoculars, towering

over the north side of the island. We are within five miles of the harbor entrance. Ahead are the outer markers for the Levu Passage, between the shoals to the north and south.

A couple of hours later we motor into the green lagoon. After settling-in on the hook in the Quarantine Area, I go to sleep to await the arrival of the health inspector.

March 5, 2011

Standing on the deck, I watch the inspector make his way back to the Customs Wharf in his dinghy. Suva is a harbor town, built on a hilly peninsula reaching into the sea. Surrounded by a blazing beach, the harbor is largely open to the north and west and edged with forest.

I shower, dress and leap into *Bit-by-Bit's* tender, *Byte-me*. I zip across the bay directly into the wind. The white buildings of the Tradewinds Marina, on the edge of the Bay of Islands, peer through the spreading Acacia trees. A few sailboats are anchored nearby. On the right, the regal buildings of the Royal Suva Yacht Club rise above the beach, and the old jail's stonewalls and barred window peep over a sand dune.

I tie up at the dinghy-dock and go walking in town. Flowering gardens and waving palm trees add bright splashes of color to the white walls, and a blend of curry and grilled fish wafts from the restaurants. Everyone smiles at me. I catch a glimpse of myself in a storefront's glass door: my hair sticks straight up from my head, as if I'm wired to a Van de Graaff generator. I wet my head under a tap in the square and, using my fingers for a comb, flatten my hair a little.

After sampling food from the various vendors, I return to the boat and use the satellite phone to call Ses and tell her I'm safe and sound.