



# Napoleon's Gambit

A novel by Eric Goldman

Sailing through history ...  
to commit the perfect crime

# *Chapter Nine*

**May 27, 1813**

His business with the Port Admiral concluded, Jean Coignart, the Lieutenant and his three men left the port, walking briskly along the Quay du Pré aux Loups. A few casks of olive oil and bales of cotton stood on its wooden boards, but many berths were empty and few people worked the docks. They turned right, away from the river, and climbed the Boulevard Jeanne d'Arc's slight incline to town. Jean paused at the top, the cobblestones rough underfoot after the barge. He gazed back towards the river, a muddy flowing band, surrounding the island. He sought out the bench at the foot of the bridge, where he had first kissed. Where was Marie now?

They stopped at the Inn de la Jeanne where Jean paid for horses, gave the Lieutenant money, and bade him repeat his orders. Jean left the

four men eating breakfast at a sidewalk table overlooking the river.

Commandant Coignart quickened his pace. Father might be visiting one of his mills, but Mamma would be there, unless on an errand. He lengthened his stride, his pulse quickening at the thought of knocking on the door. Many times on the march back from Moscow, their eyes in the blinding snow begged him to stumble forward one more step.

He ran now, his boot heels rapping on the cobblestones, his bandolier's flasks and boxes rattling on his back, and a sweat broke under the heavy coat. People stepped aside hastily as he raced around the corner on to Rue Thiers. He did not stop to admire the red and white façade of the Patisserie on the corner, or to savor its fresh-bread smell. Its dormer windows and ornate trim always reminded him of the doll's house his parents had given his younger sister, a long time ago.

He strode across the Place Cauchoise and turned right onto Rue St. André, where he slowed. He paused to regain his breath outside number twenty-three. He settled his Shako on his head and adjusted his sword and musket. The house, like many on the street, was half-timbered with pastel-shaded, plastered walls, supported by the embedded dark beams. He reached for the familiar brass doorknocker: a hand, hinged at the wrist, the fingers holding a small ball. With his heart hammering, he raised it and let it fall, three times.

The door opened. A smile replaced the butler's frown. "Master Jean! My God!" Forgetting his training, he hurried inside, calling "Madam, Master! Come quickly! A pleasant surprise awaits you!"

And there was Mamma! Breathless, her eyebrows raised, a smile hovering. She burst into tears. "Jean! Oh God, is it really you? Claude, come quickly!" She threw herself into his arms and he held her tightly. His eyes streamed tears, and he could not speak. She hugged him, reached up on tiptoe and tried to kiss his neck, sobbed and laughed. And

there was Father, with a smile to make his eyebrows vanish under the lock of hair. Gray hair, Jean was surprised to see - gray beard, too, and thinner. Seeming to have aged more than the two years that had passed. Jean released his mother, shook his father's hand and hugged him tightly. When they released each other, Jean's smile was as broad as his father's.

All three began speaking at once, stopped, began again and laughed. And Mamma said, "Son. For how long are you home?"

His smile vanished. "For breakfast only, Mamma. I must leave in three hours. But come," he said, seeing her tears. "Come, let us not waste it standing here. Let us sit - and if we could eat, that too would be a good thing."

His father frowned grimly, "A few hours - is that all our Emperor can spare our only son for? But at least, you are healthy and the same young man - as always, you are hungry." He turned to the butler who had been standing and grinning all this time, and ordered breakfast in the dining room.

His mother reached up to the scars on his cheek, "Oh Jean. The bear?" She lightly touched the lines below his missing earlobe. "Did it hurt greatly, my son?"

"No, Mamma. He was but a small bear, hungry enough to want to eat the Emperor, though. So you have been getting my letters?"

"Yes. Most treasured scraps of paper, my dear, each one a sign that you were well at that moment. But come, you are hungry - enough of talking for now."

Jean hurried upstairs to his room, threw his Shako, weapons and coat on the bed, removed his boots and walked bare feet downstairs to the kitchen. His mother lifted the black pot from above the hearth. She poured steaming water into a tub, added jugs of cold to cool it enough for him to wash, and handed him the rough soap. He removed his shirt, rolled up his pantaloons and bathed his face, arms and feet. Drying off, he accepted a

clean shirt gratefully. They seated themselves around the table.

The silver gleamed and a tray of toast smelled fragrantly. Ceramic mugs of milk and plates of fried cornmeal stood at each place. Jean sat between his parents, picked up his knife and fork and prepared to eat. His mother coughed, motioned with her eyes to his father who waited with eyes closed, hands clasped.

“Forgive me, the army breeds poor habits.”

His father nodded, mumbled his prayer and Jean ate rapidly. His father watched, amused, and when his pace slackened, he said, “So Jean, I see you are now a Commandant. Congratulations on your promotion!”

Mamma gasped in delight and threw her hands in the air. “Oh, Claude – do you not burst with the pride? So soon, Jean, to be promoted again so quickly.” And then she frowned, “I hope you are not being rewarded for another brave and foolish action, son. What did you do this time?”

“No, Mamma. It was mere fortune. I was able to assist our Emperor and he was grateful. He has sent me to deliver something to his brother, Joseph.” He broke off to look at his father. “Napoleon said you knew him, Father. He said it was how I came to serve him.”

His father nodded and looked at his wife. “Before I met you, Annette. I had been in Pisa. Studying Law with Joseph, at the university. We came back to France like brothers, so sure of ourselves, so ready to shape the world. He went to Paris, and I came back here. He is a brilliant statesman, you know. Always a good grasp of politics, despite what his brother may think now. He served with the Cinq-Cents. You know the Directory of five hundred, after the Revolution? They appointed him French ambassador to Rome. And then he married Julie Clary, let’s see, that would have been in ‘94. Napoleon made him King of Naples after that. When you graduated from the Ecolé Militaire, Jean, he offered to enlist you with the Imperial Guards. Forgive me son, I felt it would

be your best opportunity – not only for advancement, but to survive this wretched war. I am honored that the Emperor even knew, let alone remembered.”

Jean, his mouth full of food, nodded. He swallowed. “You probably saved my life, Father. The march from Moscow... had I not been part of the Imperial Guard, I would not have survived. Being with Napoleon, leading the retreat; it was not pretty, but we took what food was left.” He shrugged his shoulders and tossed his head. “But enough of war. How are the two of you? To see you like this, in our home, almost as if nothing has happened since I left, it fills my heart. How is Lucille? I have missed teasing her.”

Father laughed happily. “Your sister is well, son. You know her second child, another daughter, was born a few months ago? No! I suppose it is easier for your letters to find us, than for ours to find you.”

“You wrote, of course, but I received only one letter in all this time. From perhaps a year ago – it told of Lucille being with child. I have read it these many times; I know it by heart. And her Nicole? She must be, what, already three?”

“In six months, she will be four,” said mama. “And we are already experienced grandparents, are we not Claude?”

She looked across the table at her husband of thirty-five years. Jean lifted his eyes from his parent’s faces to the family portrait hanging on the wall opposite. A local artist painted it when Jean was eight and Lucille five. The same smile lit his parents’ eyes now. The canvas glowed with sunlight beaming in from the window, just as the sun warmed the real window now. At least the war left some things unchanged.

“And you, Mamma? How are things at home? It looks the same, but somehow it seems different. It is almost as if...”

“Almost as if there is a little less of everything, including us, dear,” she said with a rueful smile. “We are fine. We cope. Some are not so

fortunate.”

Father said, “The war, the continental trade blockade, that stupid treaty of Eden. The port of Rouen handles a mere fraction of its tonnage of just ten years ago. Last year’s subsistence crisis was appalling. We were forced to let a maid go, not for want of money, but for lack of food to feed her.

“You know trade has been embargoed between France and Britain for almost a hundred years. But we managed, by God! We smuggled our goods in and they paid a premium for our better wines and delicate cottons, and, well, we survived. Of course, they smuggled too, and the politicians on both sides were fools for attempting to halt trade. But then, the British began with their machines. Their cotton became cheaper than ours, and Frenchmen buy it now in preference. And now the blockades keep the French Navy in, the British fleets capture ships coming or leaving, and we stagnate. Our only market is France, and our people too poor to buy anything.”

Jean looked at his Father’s worried expression and his mother’s eyes saddened by defeat. They talked, lingering over cups of coffee and, for Jean, slices of freshly baked bread with thick slabs of butter. Reluctantly, he pushed back his chair and said softly, “It is time. I must leave.”

His mother bit her lip and a tear rolled down her cheek. “I am not going to spoil this wonderful moment with tears,” she said. “Come, my son. Let me hug you once more and I will flee.”

They embraced. She stared at him, fixing his face in her mind, then sobbed, turned and left the room, her dress swishing behind her. Neither man said anything for a time. Jean left to dress and returned to find his father standing at the door. He seemed more frail and worn than he had a few hours ago, and he said quietly, “Jean. Take care. Your eyes are troubled my son. You must have seen much horror in your war. Are

you fine, in your mind?"

Jean shook his head. "No man can see what I have seen, Father, and remain fine in his mind." He bent his head to whisper softly: "I would kill a man for saying what I will now speak, Father. But the Emperor, well, he is not the man he once was. He seemed to lose a part of his mind on the way to Moscow."

Jean straightened. "Bah!" he said, suddenly angry. "We lost six-hundred thousand men, Father! Six-hundred thousand like me. Their lives snuffed out. And for what? To march to Moscow and back?"

He was silent for a moment and then he began softly, "Those Russians, they, too, are mad. They are the strongest people in the world. They tempted us, led us further and further into their endless country: a skirmish here, a stand there, but always the retreat. They burned their crops; we stole from their own people, people who had hidden their last bag of potatoes! And still we marched deeper and deeper. When we reached Moscow, Napoleon sat back and waited for the Czar to surrender. Surrender, I ask you?"

"The Czar had no intention of that. No. He waited until the beginning of winter. And then he burned his own city, Father. Can you imagine that? He set it alight with us inside. I watched my men burn to not even ashes. My Shako was singed and I was half a kilometre from the fire's edge. The flames sucked the air from everywhere and the wind blew men into the inferno. For days we could see its funeral pyre as we ran away. The stink of burning flesh is seared to my nostrils, their screams haunt my dreams -."

He broke off to choke back a ragged breath and his father hugged him. "We will talk more of this, Jean. When you have come back for good. I know it looks as if this war will go on forever. But the country is too worn out, the people too tired. Take heart, my son. Courage. We will be together again, perhaps sooner than you think. And then, please, God;

there will be happier thoughts. Perhaps you will find yourself a wife.” He tried a wan smile. Jean cleared his throat, hugged his father once more and strode from the house without looking back.

An hour later, the barge cast off its last mooring line and drifted out to the center of the river. The newly hired helmsman steered her towards midstream. The current caught her and she picked up pace and headed for the coast. On board were the Captain, the crewmember, Commandant Coignart, his Sergeant, thirty-five men and two hundred-and-fifty thousand gold Napoleons.

The river broadened from Rouen to Le Havre, making it difficult for the brigands to block and he relaxed. The thought recalled his Emperor: Napoleon had widened the streets of Paris to make them difficult to barricade. He had been a man to admire then: clever, the courage of a lion, a brilliant tactician, a superb administrator...

West of Rouen, the tide flowed more strongly and they moved more rapidly. But when the tide turned and flowed inland, they stopped until it reversed. Their progress slowed.

Sailing the river’s winding path to the sea, the water seemed cleaner. Vegetation and wood floated by, but the smell was less foul, or perhaps he was just getting used to it. With men posted as guards, they took up stations behind their palisades, removed their weapons and coats, and sat down to enjoy the sun on the river.

Jean settled back on the starboard side, against the coach facing the bows. His gaze drifted idly across the undergrowth as it floated by. Mamma? He wondered if he would see his family again. If this war lasted many more years, Father might not be alive when he returned. Jean pondered life without them.

A few hours later, a stone bridge appeared ahead. He looked on his map: Pont de Brotonne. “Look alive men!” he called, scrambling to his feet. “Bridge ahead. Check your weapons. Keep your eyes open. A

few more men up front here with me.”

His men leapt up. Seconds later, two men took up station on either side of him. A few people were crossing the bridge, and a coach climbed from the right bank to the middle of the arch and rattled down the other side. A man and a woman stopped on the bridge, leaned over the parapet and looked down on the barge as it sailed beneath them. They remained gazing upstream after the barge passed and Jean thought they were probably lovers, taking a stroll. “Stand down, men. As you were,” he called.

He resumed his station near the bow. His mind drifted to his father’s parting remark of how he might find a wife. Perhaps with a loving wife like Mamma had been to Father, and perhaps watching his children grow, perhaps he might forget, or at least push into some dim memory, all that the war had shown him.

## **May 28, 1813**

With the morning sun a few hours above the horizon, the barge sailed through the center arch of the Pont de Normandie and they reached the outskirts of Honfleur on the river’s left bank. Commandant Coignart stood in the bows admiring the old port. The bars, restaurants and apartments lining the two basins sparkled in the sun. People sat at the café’s tables sipping coffee, and a fleet of fishing vessels and a small navy ship were tied to the docks.

The barge drifted round a bend to reveal the entrance to Le Havre ahead. Founded in 1517 by François I, as both a military and commercial port, it had grown as the ports on either side of it had silted up. The main channel split into two and divided again. Jean was content to leave the Captain of the barge to select a dock and tie up.

A strong smell of fish hung over the quays, and nets and pots

lay in heaps on the docks. Barrows squeaked by laden with barrels and sacks. Jean was directed to a stone Port Captain's building, in the center of the port. He found Lieutenant Gascoyne and his men seated outside, and they leapt to attention as he strode into the entrance and paused in the courtyard. He returned their salute, and debriefed the Lieutenant.

“Thank-you, Lieutenant. You have done well. The frigate, *La Clorinde*? You know where she lies? We must load the chests on board. Come lead the way.”

They retraced their steps and Jean ordered the Captain to move the barge closer to *La Clorinde*. The Commandant gave orders to dismantle their fortifications to allow them to mount the sweeps used to row the barge. With two men to each long handle, they untied the barge and handed it away from the dock. They pushed the boat further away with the sweeps and began to row. Slow jerks at first, but the men caught the rhythm and the barge picked up speed. The Captain steered the boat to the end of the channel, back up-stream a little, and turned to the channel in which *La Clorinde* was tied to a hulk.

Jean summoned Lieutenant Gascoyne to him, and they sprang off the barge. They walked to *La Clorinde*'s larboard side and mounted her gangplank. The marine on guard saluted and left them to summon the Captain. Standing in the sun, admiring the bustling port from the height of her quarterdeck, Jean watched his men prepare to unload the barge.

A throat cleared behind him. He turned. The Captain of *La Clorinde* removed his hat with a flourish and bowed. Jean's hand rose in return salute. The Captain was about five feet tall, with a body like a partridge: a large chest, sloping shoulders and a round waist with little legs. His full lips smacked wetly as he smiled. “A pleasure to welcome you aboard, Commandant. My name is Captain Grosser. The Lieutenant assured me you have a piece of parchment that makes more sense of the

order I received from the Admiral yesterday. May I see it?"

Jean handed him the parchment. The Captain whistled as he read it, re-read it and passed it back to Jean with care. "I see Commandant, a most impressive document. What is it you would wish for?"

"We will load some chests aboard, from that barge behind us. You will stow them in a room secured with a padlock. You will give the Lieutenant here the key. Lieutenant, go and tell the Sergeant to commence the loading, and then come back here and collect me."

He returned the Lieutenant's salute and faced the Captain once more. "Captain. You will prepare to sail as soon as possible. When we are a little distance off shore, I will tell you where it is we are bound." Jean looked around the ship. "So this is a frigate."

The Captain flushed. "Not just any frigate, Commandant. She is one of the fastest and most powerful ships of her class." He sniffed disdainfully. "I must go now and supervise the loading of your chests. An army man's idea of how to store heavy objects at sea will sink us before we leave port." He saluted Jean, turned on his heel and strode aft.

The Lieutenant returned and he and Jean left *La Clorinde* and walked to the adjacent quay. Two ships were moored to it, stem to stern, for more than three hundred feet. As he walked the quay, looking up their towering topsides, Jean counted thirty-seven gun ports on one side. One ship carrying seventy-four guns! He tried to imagine doing the same thing with land-based artillery. He pictured each gun on its carriage, its three tons riding on wooden wheels over rutted, muddy roads, a team of horses and men pulling it. They would be fortunate to travel a few miles in a day, yet this ship could traverse more than a hundred miles in the same time.

"Commandant," said Lieutenant Gascoyne, as they neared the first boarding ladder. "The two ships have been instructed, sir. It would seem that the one captain is junior to the other and, thus, we need speak only to the senior man. He is on board the second ship, sir. The one called

*L'Invincible*, up ahead.”

They continued past the bow of the first. Jean read her name in gold script: *Le Protée*. The marine on guard saluted the Lieutenant and the Commandant, and they boarded. A moment later, they were met by Captain Palliér. He acknowledged the Lieutenant’s salute. He gazed intently at Jean, sizing him up. “These are the most enigmatic orders I have ever been presented with, Commandant. Two line-of-battle ships standing by on the orders of an Army Lieutenant?”

He stood about five-feet-eight with wide shoulders, his hat balancing on a shock of unruly blonde hair. Laugh lines creased his mouth, but no smile hovered as he went on, “What is it, Commandant, that you wish us to do? I have nothing in writing, but the Port Admiral insists we do this. And to my astonishment, we are doing this. Are you, perhaps, to shed some light on this situation?”

“I am, Captain, but most certainly not as much as you would wish. It would be well if you would read this, to begin with.”

Jean handed his parchment pass to the Captain, who read it, pursed his lips and handed it back. For a long moment the Captain stared out to sea. He turned to look at Jean critically. “Commandant. There can be no doubt as to the authenticity of this seal, or the hand that wrote this. I have received written orders from our Emperor before. He must trust you, to give you such free reign over his subjects.” A smile hovered for a moment. “And if our Emperor trusts you in this manner, who am I to disagree?”

“Very well, Captain,” said Jean. “You are to sail as soon as you can. I will be on another ship and we will meet you outside the harbor within the hour. You will please to prepare your men and your ships. I would prefer it no one knows our destination before we are some miles offshore. I wish to limit the risk of idle chatter informing all of Le Havre before we clear the harbor.”

“A wise precaution, Commandant. How do you wish to communicate the destination to me, when we are at sea? Ah!” He said, as Jean extracted a sealed order from his pouch. “Of course, Commandant. I take it these are to remain sealed until we reach a specific time and place?”

“In a manner of speaking, Captain. You will open the orders when you see me approach your two ships just outside the harbor entrance. We are loading our cargo now, we will join you soon.”

“Very well Commandant. We shall be a mile from the harbor entrance, waiting on your arrival.” He clicked his heels, bowed, and left to issue orders.

Commandant Jean Coignart and Lieutenant Gascoyne returned to *La Clorinde*. A line of their men stood two deep in front of the barge, muskets across their chests, their eyes active. More men lined the starboard rail of the barge, monitoring the channel and passing traffic.

The Sergeant stood on *La Clorinde*'s deck, watching the jib boom hoist each chest. It rose from the barge, swung inwards above the ship's rail and disappeared into the aft hatch. Jean and Lieutenant Gascoyne strode to him. “I see you are taking no chances, Sergeant,” said Jean. “Excellent. What number chest is that?”

“Number eight, sir. We should have them all aboard shortly.”

“Very well, Sergeant. Carry on. Lieutenant, we depart as soon as the last chest is on board.”

“Very well, Commandant,” said the Lieutenant.

Jean walked a little way along the quays. He gazed about, his ears tuned for running footsteps, his eyes searching for foes amongst the harbor traffic and docks. A busy port had many eyes. But still, it was something more. Perhaps the visit to his parents had been a mistake. His soldier's purpose seemed muddled. He did not stray far from the dock and was relieved to see the last chest swing up and disappear into the hold.

He returned to the ship, and the Captain and his officers prepared to cast off. *La Clorinde* made sail, heeled to the wind and drifted away

from the dock. She turned towards the sea, her sails billowed and her wake rang out along her side. Jean walked to the bow and stared out to sea. Yes, there they were, the two ships were standing by, their sails flapping in a peculiar position. He climbed the rail a little and, standing on the bowsprit, he waved to catch Captain Palliér's attention. The man saluted, opened his orders, read them and saluted.

Jean walked aft and beckoned the Captain to him. "Captain Grosser. Those two ships will escort us to San Sebastian. Please to set a course and sail there as quickly as you can."