



JACQUES GODBOUT
OPERATION RIMBAUD

TRANSLATED BY PATRICIA CLAXTON

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PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

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Cormorant Books

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**Canada Council
for the Arts**

**Conseil des Arts
du Canada**



The publisher gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council for its publishing program. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities.

Printed and bound in Canada

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Godbout, Jacques, 1933–
[Opération Rimbaud. English]

Operation Rimbaud/Jacques Godbout; translated by Patricia Claxton.

Translation of: Opération Rimbaud.

ISBN 978-1-897151-22-8

1. Claxton, Patricia, 1929–. II. Title.
III. Title: Opération Rimbaud. English.

PS8513.02606313 2008 C843'.54 C2008-903726-X

Cover design: Angel Guerra/Archetype

Author photo: © All rights reserved

Translator photo: Larry Assam

Interior text design: Tannice Goddard/Soul Oasis Networking

Printer: Marquis

CORMORANT BOOKS INC.

215 SPADINA AVENUE, STUDIO 230, TORONTO, ON CANADA M5T 2C7

www.cormorantbooks.com

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Biarritz, May 1967

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BEFORE WE BEGIN, LET'S SAY this is a sulphurous story, it smells of the devil, stale volcanoes, wooden matches, those lemon yellow pyramids beside factories, sulphuric acid baths. You say most people can't tell the difference between the smell of sulphur and the smell of rotten eggs? All right, so this story smells of rotten eggs. You'll have to hold your nose if you want to hear it. Anyway, here I am this morning, writing something sacrilegious, satanic, scandalous. I've put away my incense burner, I've had it with ceremonials.

Through the window of my room overlooking the ocean, all the way to the far side of the bay, there are valiant souls pushing their surfboards out to sea. The picture comforts me, tells me I'm not the only token Sisyphus on earth. If it takes my last breath, I'm going to tell all with what I'm writing. Adieu, do-gooders!

I had to withdraw from the world in order to write and protect my backside. Having no particular liking for mountain retreats, miraculous grottoes, or Dominican monasteries, I chose this hotel, where I'm as anonymous as I choose and don't risk running into stooges. It's a luxury I can treat myself to before perhaps ending up in the morgue.

I arrived here with my backpack, a long beard, and a credit card. From the minute you enter, the Hôtel du Palais in Biarritz offers you an atmosphere of calm in a spacious lobby that's scented with jasmine and softly hued. The tiny receptionist behind her walnut counter is particularly comely, her face magnificently made up. The porter, to the left near the elevators and grand staircase, is reliably as deferent as a Swiss banker. Modern comfort in a nineteenth-century setting is found here. Indeed, this once was the palace of Napoléon III and the Empress Eugénie. It was turned into a casino, then into a luxury hotel for crown-owned heads, was burned down, rebuilt, then occupied during the war by the Germans, who assuredly had less fun than the movie stars after the Führer's defeat. This is a huge building of painted brick in the purest "English castle" style. They say that the Duke of Windsor and his duchess felt at home in this hotel. As for me, I feel at home anywhere. Content in some tiny cell, comfortable in high society. I'm a barely domesticated animal, an alley cat that knows how to behave.

The idea of taking up quarters in Biarritz came to me when I learned from *Paris Match* that the Emperor Haïlé

Selassie, the Lion of Juda, had spent several weeks here after I had met him in Montreal in March. We have since become bosom buddies, if I may say so. His Majesty had left Canada for Europe, and I thought he was back in the capital of Ethiopia as agreed, whereas he was really bathing with his court and drinking his fleas in the hotel's huge open-air pool. You can't trust anyone anymore.

Officially, I work for the Company of Jesus, which is why at times some people call me "Father Larochelle," despite my mere thirty-five years and my professional celibacy. But I have a feeling this is not going to last. I've pushed the door of the fourth dimension rather hard. The Company is a convenient cover for a certain number of clandestine activities, the most important of which is, and has long been, exchange-rate speculation: the network is flawless. Also in our ranks we have conscientious missionaries preoccupied with heaven and hell. These have heard the call of the true vocation and do not sleep curled up, ears cocked, in big soft beds that once belonged to the Empress Eugénie, whose initials adorn the garden and the salmon pink wallpaper.

Papa would have loved this place. He had only one big regret when he died — not to have joined a religious order in time to take off to Mexico with the coffers. "Just think, Michel," he often said, tossing back a swig of beer, "of all the land the Sulpicians own, plumb in the middle of Montreal!" He had observed that these Gentlemen of Saint Sulpice were fewer and fewer in number, and more and more senile. Child's

play, a few accounting entries and light would have shone upon our lives. My father was not a loser, but he never had any luck. His prostate did him in.

Georges Larochelle had three passions — the encyclopedias he sold door-to-door, women, and my future. His first passion fed the second, which justified the third. The encyclopedias were the reason he found himself without my mother. He offered a free after-sale service that ruined his marriage.

“Larochelle,” my mother said to him while scrambling the morning eggs, “I don’t know why you feel obliged to explain the anatomy plates to all your lady customers.”

She was exaggerating. My father did not offer the same service to all his customers, but if one of them bought all fourteen volumes of the Larousse Encyclopedia, he did feel an intellectual responsibility, as it were. Maman left. Papa, stuck in the house at night, read me pages out of his big books, and even gave me a magnifying glass so I could get a better look at the pictures. He worried about my education, signed me up with the good fathers, then found me brooding about what I was going to be: an engineer, lawyer, doctor, sociologist, dentist, pharmacist, notary ... I was eighteen.

“Join the Jesuits, Michel,” he said, “You’ll always get your bed and board, and if you jump the fence, the Virgin Mary won’t ask for a divorce.”

Maman went the distance. Legal proceedings, confrontations, witnesses, declaratory judgment, alimony collected by her lawyer, which bled our travelling salesman dry. Papa was

finished. He didn't survive long enough to see me complete my novitiate. In accordance with his last wishes, I scattered his ashes in a field of thistles, "Beautiful flowers that can protect themselves." I've painted them on my coat of arms.

I joined the Jesuits, I studied theology and other futilities. Ignatius of Loyola provides the rule and the uniform, and we of the rank and file provide the conceit and ambition. I am a summa cum laude graduate of one of the universities of our Intelligence Branch, in Chicago. It should be understood that, while the Company works closely with people in Intelligence (as it's called in English), the Superior General of the Jesuits, who is in Rome, should not bear the brunt of blame for the escapades of some of his soldiers. I must stress that all Jesuit fathers are not spies just because they belong to an international congregation; the problem is the Company's penchant for secrecy of the kind cultivated by secret services. You never know whether this chemistry professor at our college in Tokyo, or that Latin teacher in Timbuktu, is working for the greater glory of God or the greater power of the West. These divided loyalties do add spice to the vocation. It's a simple matter: true Jesuits wear hair shirts to conquer their perverse impulses, and false Jesuits use their black robes to hide their lusts — which makes them all the worse, Papa would have said.

When I left university at the age of twenty-four, I took my mercenary vows: poverty, chastity, mendacity. They started me off with some delicate little jobs in Greece, where our

archaeologists were being watched too closely by the authorities, then in Singapore, where the government was jeopardizing our imports of Cuban tobacco . I loved travelling, interminable meals taken in the company of aging fathers, theological problems raised by science, philosophical discussions, the practice of mental restriction, and the charm of mature women attracted by my cassock. An exquisite routine until this mission, which, for all my efforts, as I have said, has taken a turn as corrosive as sulphuric acid. Wealth, allurements, rebellion ...

When one has several university degrees and wears a cassock as uniform, one's most important tool for success is the art of accommodating truth. I learned this political skill very young while trying to mediate between my father and mother in their endless conjugal squabbles, redescribing reality until it pleased them in hues of fulgurating truth. I know there's an orphan's soul in me that longs to rescue every widow and is automatically the advocate of lost causes. I have never refused a job, and my superiors take advantage of my keen sense of duty . This is what has led me to retire from sight on the Avenue de l'Impératrice in Biarritz in this month of May, 1967.

This whole business began, you might say, last December 22 when the personal plane of the King of kings set down gently at Fiumicino airport. The Emperor of Ethiopia was arriving in Rome to seek help discreetly from the Catholic Church. There was of course no question of a personal meeting between the pope and the Lion of Juda, the two belonging

to churches that had been separate for centuries, ever since a falling-out concerning the Holy Ghost: an ancient squabble over seating precedence at table for the persons of the Holy Trinity. Notwithstanding, the Roman Curia did not wish to miss an opportunity for rapprochement, because the cardinals, of course, have eaten ecumenism for breakfast since Roncalli called the Vatican Council together four years ago, and the time is ripe now, if ever, to buy old pectoral crosses set with rubies at bargain prices. The sovereign pontiff therefore delegated Monsignor Sambrini of the Holy Office, a wily diplomat and the Vatican's *chargé d'affaires* for Africa, to represent him. A Vatican Rolls Royce came to take the Emperor from the plane to a papal villa south of Rome, where His Majesty, over dinner, revealed the purpose of his unprecedented visit. While admiring the villa's cypresses and statues in the light of the setting sun, he congratulated himself on his strategy: he was outfoxing all the spies in his kingdom by requesting help from yesterday's invaders.

With a telex message the very next morning, Rome enquired of the Province of Canada as to the availability of a soldier of the Company of Jesus. The Emperor had already planned a trip to North America before springtime to seek technical aid from the Canadian and United States governments, who were promising to support his mission of educating the outrageously illiterate Abyssinian people. He would kill two birds with one stone and, during the trip, meet the Jesuit chosen for this new, special mission.

The Curia could hardly have been put on the spot at a worse time. For some months, recruits had been defrocking in droves and our ranks were being decimated by a lifestyle revolution. The faith had lost authority, and the hierarchies were being rendered voiceless, shaken by carnal chaos. Fruits of the earth perfumed the air. What was the Provincial superior to do? Turn to the ranks of the young, spot a heroic strain, a young Jesuit of both physical strength and moral courage. My early record was faultless, and I was approached. The Company's reputation was at stake; there was not a moment's hesitation on my part.

"Operation Rimbaud," announced the Provincial superior, who had always loved mystery, code names, passwords, Boy Scouts, adventure. Like all classical college students in Quebec, I knew the city of Harar through the biography of the poet Arthur Rimbaud, and I knew Arthur too, I told myself, but I really knew nothing about the faraway land of the Queen of Sheba. My paternal encyclopedia recalled emphatically that the Second World War had truly begun with the invasion of Abyssinia; that in 1936, the Emperor Hailé Selassie had come to Geneva to beseech the League of Nations to come to his aid, but in vain. The Western nations beat around the bush — Mussolini was one of theirs, the Negus a comic opera king. It was the British who helped reconquer Ethiopia, and the Emperor became a figurehead of freedom who believes, as my father believed, in education as the doorway to modernity. Destiny caused our paths to cross for sure, because what else

could account for this meeting between a king and the son of a door-to-door salesman?

To emerge from the Middle Ages, Hailé Selassie had long put his hopes in a generation of girls and boys whom he had sent to study in foreign universities. But things had gone wrong. At our first private meeting, in a suite at the Windsor Hotel in Montreal, I found a pretty depressed head of state. The Lion of Juda, disheartened by ingratitude, seemed to have lost all confidence in humanity. "The very ones I have placed in the schools are openly preparing rebellion," he confided to me. He could count neither on the army nor the militia, for ambitious colonels had set up cells in both, and of course the clergy could not defend him. But what really got his goat was that the country people he had brought to the city one by one to be educated were now pretentious little bumpkins turned against him. That day, I can tell you, the Lion of Juda's mane was adroop, he was a picture of misery. He was seated in a blue velvet armchair, with his feet on a cushion so that his little legs would not dangle. His beard and moustache were meticulously trimmed, and his slightly balding pate was circled by a laurel-like wreath of salt-and-pepper hair. He wore a field marshal's uniform, while I had put on a brand new cassock and stood deferentially before him, as it behooved me in the circumstances.

The Negus spoke so softly one might suspect he was afraid the room was bugged, which was not impossible. "I know what's going to happen," he muttered, "they'll attempt a

putsch, assassinate or exile my sons, set up a puppet government, find a way to neutralize me; the army will take power and the people will suffer." A prophet.

I was thinking to myself that he was talking to the wrong person. He didn't need Jesuits, he needed the American army or the CIA to deal with those nascent Marxist cells. But he had been asking for trouble, too. Since his return to government in Addis Ababa, he had been acting the sly dog, playing the Americans against the Soviets, the British against the French, allowing one country to open a clinic, another to sell arms, this one to subsidize a high school, that one to manage experimental farms. He thought he could guarantee his independence by juggling the balance of influences. He should have known that communists cheat at Monopoly.

Of course, Hailé Selassie himself was no lamb of God. After the death of King Menelik, he had been grossly deceitful in order to seize power. Did he remember the cruelty with which he had captured the throne for himself? His cousin, Princess Zauditu, was the rightful heiress, but for two years she had been suffering from tuberculosis. Prince Selassie was returning at the time from a period of study in Paris and London. Flourishing his new-found knowledge, he recommended to the court physicians a treatment then in fashion in the important centres of Europe, he said, giving as examples the sanatoriums of Switzerland, to which tubercular patients were flocking from the world over, seeking the fresh, salubrious air of the Alps.

Pulmonary ailments are treated in the mountains, the prince explained to Zauditu. Why not take advantage of Ethiopia's own *sier ras*? He recommended that his ailing cousin take hot baths, after which, on nights when the moon was full, she should dry herself standing naked on the heights in the open air with her arms crossed over her breasts, face to the wind. Zauditu was not very sharp, and Selassie was already the king of foxes. Did he really believe so strongly in the healing power of pure air? This, in any event, is how the Ras Makonnen became the Negus Negushi, the King of kings, and his cousin a figure of legend.

I looked anxiously at the small, vexed potentate, wondering why the Company of Jesus had sent me to his side. This strange man, who once undoubtedly had irresistible charisma, looked, with his smooth, dark skin, like a figure from the yellowed pictures in my missal.

"I know," he added softly, "that Abyssinia even nowadays is a bagatelle in the eyes of your nations. But governments fall every day into the hands of the communists. I have warned the allies. They are still not hearing me."

"Westerners trust you, Your Majesty. You have been received in Washington."

"Trust without military support does not go very far," the Negus replied. "I envy the revolutionaries, who have found all the help they need."

"Your Majesty, how can I be of service?"

Would he ever get to the point, with his typically African

way of approaching the nub of a question a little bit at a time?

I was thinking about launching appeals in neighbouring countries. We had Jesuits stationed in Egypt and others in Kenya. What if Gamal Abdel Nasser, one of the best students at our college in Cairo (back when King Farouk was exacting tribute in gold to match his weight) decided to help the Emperor? To all my suggestions, the Lion of Judah kept replying, "It's too late, too late ... that's not what I need, I have to be sure of staying above the fray ..."

I didn't know what else to suggest.

"Perhaps," I ventured, "you would like me to organize a press campaign in favour of your undertakings?"

The Emperor cut me short with his stare alone, his small head thrust forward, his dark eyes like burning coals in his emaciated face, his lips trembling as he searched for words to properly express his thoughts.

"Don't be naive! I have no time to waste with journalists ..."

I wasn't being naive, I was being careful. You can hide a lot under a cassock, a miscellany of weapons, machine guns, revolvers, knives, radios, cards you can lay down to win the game. But that day I couldn't hide anything from the Emperor. He had succeeded in making me feel sorry for him.

I said gravely, "Your Majesty, my superiors have ordered me to place myself at your disposal without restriction. With all due respect, that is what I am doing."

I saw a smile. I thought, a seasoned Jesuit would not have expressed himself better. Haile Selassie will be my pope, my

military and spiritual leader. I was pleased with myself. I expected him to hold out his arms to me. All he did was let out a hoarse cry that woke up two young chihuahuas, which came trotting over the Persian rug to him and laid their muzzles on the cushion at his feet, emitting plaintive yowls. Was I supposed to do likewise? Does an emperor expect that degree of submission? I had no desire to get down on all fours and bark!

The Negus stroked his pups as he looked at me, then said softly and soberly, "There is a legend people believe, which does not offend me and I know is not a figment of my imagination, but history. Listen to me carefully: I, Monsieur Larochelle, am the custodian of the Tablets of the Law. You have heard of them?"

He looked at me defiantly. A Jesuit could well understand what he was talking about, and even more, a Québécois suckled at the biblical nipple.

My neurons and synapses raced back over time, the Old Testament, those encyclopedias; I was overcome by a rush of gratitude to my father.

"In truth, Your Majesty, I recall that Moses, when guiding the tribe of Israel, received the Tablets of Judaic Law from the very hands of God."

"Just so, Monsieur Larochelle. While the Israelites were allowing themselves to be enticed by Satan and his idols, Moses, having led his people out of Egypt, spent days and nights on Mount Sinai, where he received from God the Torah and its Commandments."

“And you ...”

“Those stones are today in my possession. They are my strength and my power, they must absolutely not fall into impious hands.”

So this was what our conversation was about. Did he really believe this claptrap? Through the window behind him, I could see a sunny Montreal. Leafless maple trees, the automatic parking garage on Stanley Street where an elevator lifted cars eight floors, a billboard advertising Players' cigarettes, electric wires strung from pole to pole, criss-crossing the landscape. And before me, a little man with two ridiculous little dogs at his feet, telling me calmly that he was the possessor of Moses's Tablets of the Law. Did he carry them around in his luggage? Was I supposed to believe in them, too? Eternal God! God Most High! If the old fellow was telling me he believed in the Tablets, who was I to contradict him? Besides, I remembered a lesson taught me by my teacher in Chicago: always leave the window open a crack for the unimaginable. In my trade, you mustn't ever swear by anything, or brush off all possibility of magic.

“You can't keep putting your finger in Jesus's wounds,” said Father Rodriguez, who was my guardian angel during the Exercises prescribed by Saint Ignatius, and who subsequently became my best friend. “After sophistry, the danger awaiting us is sterility,” he added, observing that despite their literature courses, our colleges produced few poets. “Our clients are often motivated by curious passions that we must

adapt to.” He was speaking with the voice of experience. I would adapt.

The Emperor leapt from his chair like a boy jumping out of bed. “I have asked your superiors to second you to my service,” he said in a low voice with a slight London accent, “but before we reach an agreement, I want to ask you a question ...” He walked to and fro, making me giddy with his pacing. Then he came and planted himself in front of me, his head level with my chest. Behind him, the chihuahuas began to yap uncontrollably.

“If I put the Tablets of the Law in your care, what would you do?”

Now I saw that I was cornered, like Moses, and like him as well, no doubt, I suddenly felt very much alone in the world. The Tablets of the Law in the hands of an agnostic Jesuit, baptized in the chapel of Notre-Dame Hospital, according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church, whether I liked it or not! Really! Outrageous! An awesome idea! I didn’t believe in God, but the thought that he could have dictated whatever he wanted didn’t seem so outlandish.

And then, maybe once upon a time God did exist. After all, they’d been trumpeting his death for over a hundred years ... What was written on those ancient tablets? The Ten Commandments. I remembered the first: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” Of course. It was in his own interest.

“Your Majesty, you are aware that I am associated with the Church of Rome ...”

“And I with the Church of Alexandria. These are only administrative questions; we are both Christians, Monsieur Larochelle. The Amharas, who are my ancestors, converted to Christianity several centuries ago, and the Tablets of the Law have been located in our Empire since the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. They were brought by caravan to the coast of Egypt, and there placed on barges that carried them up the Bahr-el-Azrak, the Blue Nile, to Khartoum, to where our kingdom extended at the time, before the Muslim invasions. It is the tablets that have enabled us to stand firm to this day against the sons of Muhammed. What do you think about this?”

Churchill, Roosevelt, de Gaulle, Nehru, Mao, Haile Selassie, the faces of these giants sprang to my mind — I had been summoned by History. What would I do? As a child, I had learned to chew a matter over well in my mind before speaking, the better to dress the truth.

“You will allow me to think about what I would do, Your Majesty,” I replied. “I will not improvise on a matter of this importance. I promise you on my honour to protect them, take the greatest care of them, keep them in a Christian country, but I cannot decently offer you a complete and adequate answer now.”

The little man with the proud head of hair looked at me with satisfaction, then held out his left hand. On it glittered a gold ring set with a sapphire, and on this ring I laid my lips to seal our agreement.

“Monsieur Larochelle, I do not think you will have too much trouble accomplishing your mission,” he said as he dismissed me.

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