

The Devil's Round

A Tale of Flemish Golf

By Charles Deulin

[The following story, translated by Miss Isabel Bruce from *Le Grand Choleur* of M. Charles Deulin (*Contes du Roi Gainbrinus*), gives a great deal of information about French and Flemish golf. As any reader will see, this ancient game represents a stage of evolution between golf and hockey. The object is strike a ball, in as few strokes as possible, to a given point; but, after every three strokes, the opponent is allowed to *décholer*, or make one stroke back, or into a hazard. Here the element of hockey comes in. Get rid of this element, let each man hit his own ball, and, in place of striking to a point—say, the cemetery gate—let men “putt” into holes, and the Flemish game becomes golf. It is of great antiquity. Ducange, in his *Lexicon of Low Latin*, gives *Choulla*, French *choule*=“Globulus ligneus qui clava propellitur”—a wooden ball struck with a club. The head of the club was of iron (cf. *crossare*). This is borne out by a miniature in a missal of 1504 which represents peasants playing *choule* with clubs very like niblicks. Ducange quotes various MS. references of 1353, 1357, and other dates older by a century than our earliest Scotch references to golf. At present the game is played in Belgium with a strangely-shaped lofting-iron and a ball of beechwood. M. Zola (*Germinal*, p. 310) represents his miners playing *chole*, or *chouille*, and says that they hit drives of more than 500 yards. Experiments made at Wimbledon with a Belgian club sent over by M. Charles Michel suggest that M. Zola has over-estimated the distance. But M. Zola and M. Deulin agree in making the players *run* after the ball. M. Henri Gaidoz adds that a similar game, called *soule*, is played in various departments of France. He refers to Laisnel de la Salle. The name *chole* may be connected with German *Kolbe*, and *golf* may be the form which this word would assume in a Celtic language. All this makes golf very old; but the question arises, Are the “holes” to which golfers play of Scotch or of Dutch origin? There are several old Flemish pictures of golf; do any of them show players in the act of “holing out”? There is said to be such a picture at Neuchâtel.

A. LANG.]

I

Once upon a time there lived at the hamlet of Coq, near Condé-sur-l'Escaut, a wheelwright called Roger. He was a good fellow, untiring both at his sport and at his toil, and as skilful in lofting a ball with a stroke of his club as in putting together a cartwheel. Every one knows that the game of golf consists in driving towards a given point a ball of cherrywood with a club which has for head a sort of little iron shoe without a heel.

For my part, I do not know a more amusing game; and when the country is almost cleared of the harvest, men, women, children, everybody, drives his ball as you please, and there is nothing cheerier than to see them filing on a Sunday like a flight of starlings across potato fields and ploughed lands.

II

Well, one Tuesday, it was a Shrove Tuesday, the wheelwright of Coq laid aside his plane, and was slipping on his blouse to go and drink his can of beer at Condé, when two strangers came in, club in hand.

“Would you put a new shaft to my club, master?” said one of them.

“What are you asking me, friends? A day like this! I wouldn't give the smallest stroke of the chisel for a brick of gold. Besides, does any one play golf on Shrove Tuesday? You had much better go and see the mummers tumbling in the high street of Condé.”

“We take no interest in the tumbling of mummers,” replied the stranger. “We have challenged each other at golf and we want to play it out. Come, you won’t refuse to help us, you who are said to be one of the finest players of the country?”

“If it is a match, that is different,” said Roger.

He turned up his sleeves, hooked on his apron, and in the twinkling of an eye had adjusted the shaft.

“How much do I owe you?” asked the unknown, drawing out his purse.

“Nothing at all, faith; it is not worth while.”

The stranger insisted, but in vain.

III

“You are too honest, i’faith,” said he to the wheelwright, “for me to be in your debt. I will grant you the fulfilment of three wishes.”

“Don’t forget to wish what is *best*,” added his companion.

At these words the wheelwright smiled incredulously.

“Are you not a couple of the loafers of Capelette?” he asked, with a wink.

The idlers of the crossways of Capelette were considered the wildest wags in Condé.

“Whom do you take us for?” replied the unknown in a tone of severity, and with his club he touched an axle, made of iron, which instantly changed into one of pure silver.

“Who are you, then,” cried Roger, “that your word is as good as ready money?”

“I am St. Peter, and my companion is St. Antony, the patron of golfers.”

“Take the trouble to walk in, gentlemen,” said the wheelwright of Coq; and he ushered the two saints into the back parlour. He offered them chairs, and went to draw a jug of beer in the cellar. They clinked their glasses together, and after each had lit his pipe:

“Since you are so good, sir saints,” said Roger, “as to grant me the accomplishment of three wishes, know that for a long while I have desired three things. I wish, first of all, that whoever seats himself upon the elm-trunk at my door may not be able to rise without my permission. I like company and it bores me to be always alone.”

St. Peter shook his head and St. Antony nudged his client.

IV

“When I play a game of cards, on Sunday evening, at the ‘Fighting Cock,’ ” continued the wheelwright, “it is no sooner nine o’clock than the garde-champêtre comes to chuck us out. I desire that whoever shall have his feet on my leathern apron cannot be driven from the place where I shall have spread it.”

St. Peter shook his head, and St. Antony, with a solemn air, repeated:

“Don’t forget what is *best*.”

“What is best,” replied the wheelwright of Coq, nobly, “is to be the first golfer in the world. Every time I find my master at golf it turns my blood as black as the inside of the chimney. So I want a club that will carry the ball as high as the belfry of Condé, and will infallibly win me my match.”

“So be it,” said St. Peter.

“You would have done better,” said St. Antony, “to have asked for your eternal salvation.”

“Bah!” replied the other. “I have plenty of time to think of that; I am not yet greasing my boots for the long journey.”

The two saints went out and Roger followed them, curious to be present at such a rare game; but suddenly, near the Chapel of St. Antony, they disappeared.

The wheelwright then went to see the mummers tumbling in the high street of Condé.

When he returned, towards midnight, he found at the corner of his door the desired club. To his great surprise it was only a bad little iron head attached to a wretched worn-out shaft. Nevertheless he took the gift of St. Peter and put it carefully away.

V

Next morning the Condéens scattered in crowds over the country, to play golf, eat red herrings, and drink beer, so as to scatter the fumes of wine from their heads and to revive after the fatigues of the Carnival. The wheelwright of Coq came too, with his miserable club, and made such fine strokes that all the players left their games to see him play. The following Sunday he proved still more expert; little by little his fame spread through the land. From ten leagues round the most skilful players hastened to come and be beaten, and it was then that he was named the Great Golfer.

He passed the whole Sunday in golfing, and in the evening he rested himself by playing a game of matrimony at the “Fighting Cock.” He spread his apron under the feet of the players, and the devil himself could not have put them out of the tavern, much less the rural policeman. On Monday morning he stopped the pilgrims who were going to worship at Notre Dame de J3on Secours; he induced them to rest themselves upon his *causeuse*, and did not let them go before he had confessed them well.

In short, he led the most agreeable life that a good Fleming can imagine, and only regretted one thing—namely, that he had not wished it might last for ever.

VI

Well, it happened one day that the strongest player of Mons, who was called Paternostre, was found dead on the edge of a bunker. His head was broken, and near him was his niblick, red with blood.

They could not tell who had done this business, and as Paternostre often said that at golf he feared neither man nor devil, it occurred to them that he had challenged Mynheer van Belzébuth, and that as a punishment for this he had knocked him on the head. Mynheer van Belzéhuth is, as every one knows, the greatest gamester that there is upon or under the earth, but the game he particularly affects is golf. When he goes his round in Flanders one always meets him, club in hand, like a true Fleming.

The wheelwright of Coq was very fond of Paternostre, who, next to himself, was the best golfer in the country. He went to his funeral with some golfers from the hamlets of Coq, La Cigogne, and La Queue de l’Ayache.

On returning from the cemetery they went to the tavern to drink, as they say, to the memory of the dead,¹ and there they lost themselves in talk about the noble game of golf. When they separated, in the dusk of evening:

“A good journey to you,” said the Belgian players, “and may St. Antony, the patron of golfers, preserve you from meeting the devil on the way!”

“What do I care for the devil?” replied Roger. “If he challenged me I should soon beat him!”

The companions trotted from tavern to tavern without misadventure; but the wolf-bell had long tolled for retiring in the belfry of Condé when they returned each one to his own den.

VII

As he was putting the key into the lock the wheelwright thought he heard a shout of mocking laughter. He turned, and saw in the darkness a man six feet high, who again burst out laughing.

“What are you laughing at?” said he, crossly.

“At what? Why, at the *aplomb* with which you boasted a little while ago that you would dare measure yourself against the devil.”

“Why not, if he challenged me?”

“Very well, my master, bring your clubs. I challenge you!” said Mynheer van Belzébuth, for it was himself. Roger recognized him by a certain odour of sulphur that always hangs about his majesty.

“What shall the stake be?” he asked resolutely.

“Your soul?”

“Against what?”

“Whatever you please.”

The wheelwright reflected.

“What have you there in your sack?”

“My spoils of the week.”

“Is the soul of Paternostre among them?”

“To be sure! and those of five other golfers; dead, like him, without confession.”

“I play you my soul against that of Paternostre.”

“Done!”

VIII

The two adversaries repaired to the adjoining field and chose for their goal the door of the cemetery of Condé¹ Belzébuth teed a ball on a frozen heap, after which he said, according to custom:

“From here, as you lie, in how many turns of three strokes will you run in?”

“In two,” replied the great golfer.

And his adversary was not a little surprised, for from there to the cemetery was nearly a quarter of a league.

“But how shall we see the ball?” continued the wheelwright.

“True!” said Belzébuth.

He touched the ball with his club, and it shone suddenly in the dark like an immense glowworm.

“Fore!” cried Roger.

¹ They play to points, not holes.

He hit the ball with the head of his club, and it rose to the sky like a star going to rejoin its sisters. In three strokes it crossed three-quarters of the distance.

“That is good!” said Belzébuth, whose astonishment redoubled. “My turn to play now!”²

With one stroke of the club he drove the ball over the roofs of Coq nearly to Maison Blanche, half a league away. The blow was so violent that the iron struck fire against a pebble.

“Good St. Antony! I am lost, unless you come to my aid,” murmured the wheelwright of Coq.

He struck tremblingly; but, though his arm was uncertain, the club seemed to have acquired a new vigour. At the second stroke the ball went as if of itself and hit the door of the cemetery.

“By the horns of my grandfather!” cried Belzébuth, “it shall not be said that I have been beaten by a son of that fool Adam. Give me my revenge.”

“What shall we play for?”

“Your soul and that of Paternostre against the souls of two golfers.”

IX

The devil played up, “pressing” furiously; his club blazed at each stroke with showers of sparks. The ball flew from Condé to Bon-Secours, to Pernwelz, to Leuze. Once it spun away to Tournai, six leagues from there.

It left behind a luminous tail like a comet, and the two golfers followed, so to speak, on its track. Roger was never able to understand how he ran, or rather flew so fast, and without fatigue.

In short, he did not lose a single game, and won the souls of the six defunct golfers. Belzébuth rolled his eyes like an angry tom-cat.

“Shall we go on?” said the wheelwright of Coq.

“No,” replied the other; “they expect me at the Witches’ Sabbath on the hill of Copiéumont.

“That brigand,” said he aside, “is capable of filching all my game.”

And he vanished.

Returned home, the great golfer shut up his souls in a sack and went to bed, enchanted to have beaten Mynheer van Belzébuth.

X

Two years after the wheelwright of Coq received a visit which he little expected. An old man, tall, thin and yellow, came into the workshop carrying a scythe on his shoulder.

“Are you bringing me your scythe to haft anew, master?”

“No, faith, *my* scythe is never unhafted.”

“Then how can I serve you?”

“By following me: your hour is come.

“The devil,” said the great golfer, “could you not wait a little till I have finished this wheel?”

² After each three strokes the opponent has one hit back, or into a hazard.

“Be it so! I have done hard work today and I have well earned a smoke.”

“In that case, master, sit down there on the *causeuse*. I have at your service some famous tobacco at seven petards the pound.”

“That’s good, faith; make haste.”

And Death lit his pipe and seated himself at the door on the elm trunk.

Laughing in his sleeve, the wheelwright of Coq returned to his work. At the end of a quarter of an hour Death called to him:

“Ho! faith, will you soon have finished?”

The wheelwright turned a deaf ear and went on planing, singing:

“Attendez-moi sur l’orme;
Vous m’attendrez longtemps.”

“I don’t think he hears me,” said Death. “Ho! friend, are you ready?”

“Va-t-en voir s’ils viennent, Jean,
Va-t-en voir s’ils viennent,”

replied the singer.

“Would the brute laugh at me?” said Death to himself.

And he tried to rise.

To his great surprise he could not detach himself from the *causeuse*. He then understood that he was the sport of a superior power.

“Let us see,” he said to Roger. “What will you take to let me go? Do you wish me to prolong your life ten years?”

“J’ai de bon tabac dans ma tabatière,”

sang the great golfer.

“Will you take twenty years?”

“Il pleut, il pleut, bergère;
Rentre tes blancs moutons.”

“Will you take a fifty, wheelwright?—may the devil admire you!”

The wheelwright of Coq intoned:

“Bon voyage, cher Dumollet,
A Saint-Malo débarquez sans naufrage.”

In the meanwhile the clock of Condé had just struck four, and the boys were coming out of school. The sight of this great dry heron of a creature who struggled on the *causeuse*, like a devil in a holy-water pot, surprised and soon delighted them.

Never suspecting that when seated at the door of the old, Death watches the young, they thought it funny to put out their tongues at him, singing in chorus:

“Bon voyage, cher Dumollet,
A Saint-Malo débarquez sans naufrage.”

“Will you take a hundred years?” yelled Death.

“Rein? How? What? Were you not speaking of an extension of a hundred years? I accept with all my heart, master; but let us understand: I am not such a fool as to ask for the lengthening of my old age.

“Then what do you want?”

“From old age I only ask the experience which it gives by degrees. ‘Si jeunesse savait, si vieillesse pouvait!’ says the proverb. I wish to preserve for a hundred years the strength of a young man, and to acquire the knowledge of an old one.”

“So be it,” said Death; “I shall return this day a hundred years.”

“Bon voyage, cher Dumollet,
A Saint-Malo débarquez sans naufrage.”

XI

The great golfer began a new life. At first he enjoyed perfect happiness, which was increased by the certainty of its not ending for a hundred years. Thanks to his experience, he so well understood the management of his affairs that he could leave his mallet and shut up shop.¹

He experienced, nevertheless, an annoyance he had not foreseen. His wonderful skill at golf ended by frightening the players whom he had at first delighted, and was the cause of his never finding any one who would play against him.

He therefore quitted the canton and set out on his travels over French Flanders, Belgium, and all the greens where the noble game of golf is held in honour. At the end of twenty years he returned to Coq to be admired by a new generation of golfers, after which he departed to return twenty years later.

Alas! in spite of its apparent charm, this existence before long became a burden to him. Besides that, it bored him to win on every occasion; he was tired of passing like the Wandering Jew through generations, and of seeing the sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons of his friends grow old, and die out. He was constantly reduced to making new friendships which were undone by the age or death of his fellows; all changed around him, he only did not change.

He grew impatient of this eternal youthfulness which condemned him to taste the same pleasures for ever, and he sometimes longed to know the calmer joys of old age. One day he caught himself at his looking-glass, examining whether his hair had not begun to grow white; nothing seemed so beautiful to him now as the snow on the forehead of the old.

XII

In addition to this, experience soon made him so wise that he was no longer amused at anything. If sometimes in the tavern he had a fancy for making use of his apron to pass the night at cards: “What is the good of this excess?” whispered experience; “it is not sufficient to be unable to shorten one’s days, one must also avoid making oneself ill.”

He reached the point of refusing himself the pleasure of drinking his pint and smoking his pipe. Why, indeed, plunge into dissipations which enervate the body and dull the brain?

The wretch went further and gave up golf! Experience convinced him that the game is a dangerous one, which overheats one, and is eminently adapted to produce colds, catarrhs, rheumatism, and inflammation of the lungs.

Besides, what is the use, and what great glory is it to be reputed the first golfer in the world?

Of what use is glory itself? A vain hope, vain as the smoke of a pipe.

When experience had thus bereft him one by one of his delusions, the unhappy golfer became mortally weary. He saw that he had deceived himself, that delusion has its price, and that the greatest charm of youth is perhaps its inexperience.

He thus arrived at the term agreed on in the contract, and as he had not had a paradise here below, he sought through his hardly-acquired wisdom a clever way of conquering one above.

XIII

Death found him at Coq at work in his shop. Experience had at least taught him that work is the most lasting of pleasures.

“Are you ready?” said Death.

“I am.”

He took his club, put a score of balls in his pocket, threw his sack over his shoulder, and buckled his gaiters without taking off his apron.

“What do you want your club for?”

“Why, to golf in paradise with my patron St. Antony.”

“Do you fancy, then, that I am going to conduct you to paradise?”

“You must, as I have half-a-dozen souls to carry there, that I once saved from the clutches of Belzébuth”

“Better have saved your own. *En route, cher Dumollet.*” ‘

The great golfer saw that the old reaper bore him a grudge, and that he was going to conduct him to the paradise of the lost.

Indeed a quarter of an hour later the two travellers knocked at the gate of hell.

“Toc, toe!”

“Who is there?”

“The wheelwright of Coq,” said the great golfer.

“Don’t open the door,” cried Belzébuth; “that rascal wins at every turn; he is capable of depopulating my empire.”

Roger laughed in his sleeve.

“Oh! you are not saved,” said Death. “I am going to take you where you won’t be cold either.”

Quicker than a beggar would have emptied a poor’s box they were in purgatory.

“Toc—toc!”

“Who is there?”

“The wheelwright of Coq,” said the great golfer.

“But he is in a state of mortal sin,” cried the angel on duty. “Take him away from here—he can’t come in.”

“I cannot, all the same, let him linger between heaven and earth,” said Death; “I shall shunt him back to Coq.”

“Where they will take me for a ghost. Thank you! is there not still paradise?”

XIV

They were there at the end of a short hour. “Toc, toc!”

“Who is there?”

“The wheelwright of Coq,” said the great golfer. “Ah! my lad,” said St. Peter, half opening the door,

“I am really grieved. St. Antony told you long ago you had better ask for the salvation of your soul.”

“That is true, St. Peter,” replied Roger with a sheepish air. “And how is he, that blessed St. Antony? Could I not come in for one moment to return the visit he once paid me?”

“Why, here he comes,” said St. Peter, throwing the door wide open.

In the twinkling of an eye the sly golfer had flung himself into paradise, unhooked his apron, let it fall to the ground, and seated himself down on it.

“Good morning, St. Antony,” said he with a fine salute. “You see I had plenty of time to think of paradise, for here we are!”

“What! *You* here!” cried St. Antony.

“Yes, I and my company,” replied Roger, opening his sack and scattering on the carpet the souls of the six golfers.

“Will you have the goodness to pack right off, all of you?”

“Impossible,” said the great golfer, showing his apron.

“The rogue has made game of us,” said St. Antony. “Come, St. Peter, in memory of our game of golf, let him in with his sods. Besides, he has had his purgatory on earth.”

“It is not a very good precedent,” murmured St. Peter.

“Bah!” replied Roger, “if we have a few good golfers in paradise, where is the harm?”

XV

Thus, after having lived long, golfed much and drunk many cans of beer, the wheelwright of Coq called the Great Golfer was admitted to paradise; but I advise no one to copy him, for it is not quite the right way to go, and St. Peter might not always be so compliant, though great allowances must be made for golfers.