

Thorne Guy

Chance in Chains: A Story of Monte Carlo



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CHAPTER I

It was nine o'clock at night, and the thirty huge dynamos of the Société Générale Electrique of Paris were nearly all at work. In the great glass-roofed hall of the Mont Parnasse Central Power Station blue-bloused workmen moved quietly over the shining floors of white concrete, pausing now and then by this or that purring, spitting monster, scrutinising the whirring, glittering copper drums, listening with experienced ears for the slightest variation in the deep wasp-like hum, touching a lever here, adjusting a screw there, or oiling a bearing with tin cans beaked like a snipe.

Huge arc lamps hanging from the ceiling cast a steel-blue radiance over the hall, a radiance so cruel and intense that the shadows of the machinery which were thrown upon the floor were as black and sharply defined as fretwork of ebony.

The incandescent lamps which showed above each of the three great switchboards of brass and vulcanite, although they were burning at full power, glowed orange in the stupendous light from above.

The monster dynamos were making light for half eastern Paris. The Gare Mont Parnasse, from where trains were running every two minutes with late business folk to Meudon, Sèvres and Versailles, was lit from this room. The dinner tables of the foreign Ambassadors on the Quai Austerlitz were illuminated by favour of these serene, relentless marvels, and, across the Seine, many a glittering café upon the heights of the pleasure city Montmartre were switching on hundreds of fresh lights in the expectation of their supper custom – even as a new dynamo was started to cope with the extra strain.

At one side of the hall a few concrete steps led into the little glass-fronted room where the superintendent engineer on duty always sat.

The room was some twelve feet square, walled with white tiles like a model dairy, and from where he sat at a deal table the engineer could look out into every part of the hall. In the hall itself it was cold, though the electricians felt but little of it owing to the fresh ozone constantly liberated from the dynamos into the air. Outside, in Paris, it was bitterly cold – a damp and foggy cold of late November. But in the room of the superintendent engineer an electric stove burned brightly and warmed it.

Two people were in the room now, Emile Deschamps and Basil Gregory, both of them employed by the Société Générale.

Deschamps was a young man of about twenty-six. His jet black hair, closely cropped to a rather large and well-shaped head, together with the swarthy tint of his complexion, proclaimed him of the South, a veritable son of the Midi from Orange, Avignon, or Marseilles. He wore a small black moustache, and his long-fingered right hand was deeply stained with the juice of cheap cigarettes.

The man who sat opposite to him, at the other end of the table, was unmistakably English. He was smoking a briar pipe, and though his clothes – neither new nor fashionably cut – were distinctly Parisian, his fair hair, blue eyes and rather heavy yellow moustache were eloquent of his nationality. He was bending over a large sheet of drawings on tracing paper with strained and careful attention.

He looked up suddenly, removed the pipe from his mouth, and began speaking in a torrent of French so perfect that he might very well have passed for a Parisian.

"Emile, I think I have it at last. The position of neutrality varies with the type of the machine owing to the fact of armature reaction, which distorts the magnetic field. We must therefore connect the commutating poles in series with the armature, when their windings will carry the full armature current."

Deschamps nodded, thought for a moment, and a quick technical discussion began between the two men, the sheet of drawings being pushed from one to the other, marked and annotated in the margin with pencil.

Suddenly Deschamps leant back in his chair.

"Yes," he said, "there can be no doubt about it. We're on the track, if we have not already discovered the most revolutionary theory in wireless telegraphy that the world has known as yet! What we know now, at nine o'clock on a November evening in a power station in Paris, might alter the whole course of life and society all over the world."

The Englishman nodded, with less excited but perfectly sincere agreement.

"Very well, then," cried Deschamps, "will the world ever benefit by our three years' work, our marvellous discovery? No! We're two poor devils, junior engineers of this company on two hundred and fifty francs a month. In all France no one will listen to us, and in all England also, as you have discovered. And why?"

"Oh, what is the use, Emile?" Gregory replied, cutting short his friend. "We have talked it over too many times. It's no good making a song about it. We have not got the money to carry out our experiments thoroughly and to construct our models, twenty thousand pounds – five hundred thousand francs, my friend! And as we shall never get that, no one will listen to us and it will remain for someone else to make our discovery when we're – either when we're dead or still nursing Thierry dynamos at a few francs a day."

As he spoke he rolled up the sheet of drawings and, with a deep sigh, thrust it into the inner pocket of his coat.

"Come along," he said; "we had better be getting home. It is more comfortable there than here, at any rate; and there's still one bottle of Maçon."

They left the little alcoved room, walked slowly down the hall, with a word or two to the foreman, and passed out into the office, where the engineer who was to succeed them and watch through the night was smoking with the timekeeper.

Then, arm in arm, they passed into Paris.

They were a strange couple, these two. Basil Gregory was the son of a Cambridge tutor, who early in his career had gone to Paris as the English master of a famous Lycée. He had married a Frenchwoman, who had died five years after Basil's birth. The boy had been brought up in Paris until he was old enough to go to one of the lesser public schools of England, which was all his father could afford for him. He won a science scholarship from his school to Cambridge, had worked hard and played hard at the University, until an unfortunate encounter with a proctor during one of the evenings of the "May Week" had caused him to be sent down for ever and a day. It was a stupid affair enough, but the hot-headed young man's treatment of the guardian of University morals had been too flagrant to be passed over.

Basil had returned to Paris, spent six months as a pupil in the school for electrical engineers, and had finally been apprenticed to the Société Générale. At the end of his apprenticeship his father had died, leaving him his blessing and a couple of hundred pounds. From that time to this, and he was now exactly the same age as his friend Deschamps, the young man had worked as a junior engineer at the central power station. His salary was ten pounds a month. There were innumerable people before him, and his prospects seemed absolutely nil.

As for Deschamps, he was the son of a bankrupt wine merchant of Marseilles. With a remarkable taste for science and an especial interest in electricity, he had come to Paris – after an apprenticeship at the electrical station of Monte Carlo – and was in precisely the same state as Basil Gregory. The two young men had become friends at once. Each recognised in the other a brain above the average. Both of them were intensely interested in their work, both of them had the temper of mind which flouts accepted theories and ever presses forward to new and epoch-making discovery. They were pioneers, and knew it. Without conceit, without any self-deception, they were quietly

certain of their own powers. They had worked together, spending every moment of their spare time and every franc they could afford upon a new and original development in wireless telegraphy. They had arrived at a point when they were both convinced that they had wrested an entirely new secret from Nature, and at this point they found, as so many inventors and pioneers have found in the past, that the way was absolutely barred for want of capital. In their hands they were sure they held the talisman of fortune and undying renown. It was useless to them for want of money.

This night in Paris was bitter cold. Moreover, an infrequent and dreaded occurrence in Paris, a dense fog lay over the city. These Parisian fogs are not the sulphurous, pea-soup discomforts of London, but they are almost as unpleasant, and quite as upsetting to ordinary life and comfort. A dank, grey mist, opaque and wet, seems to rise from the Seine, spread outwards in evergrowing density and chill, until all the central quarter of Paris is hidden and throttled by it.

"*Diable!*" Deschamps said, coughing, as they left the power station behind them. "*Une vraie brume Anglaise.*"

Gregory shrugged his shoulders. "It is pretty bad," he said, "and we can't see a yard in front of our noses. Still, if you had experienced a London 'particular,' Emile – well, then you *would* know!"

There was a silence between the young men as they tramped away to the Latin Quarter, where they shared a room in a little fifth-rate hotel not far from the Quai Voltaire. The night was bitterly cold, certainly not inviting conversation, and the thoughts of the pair were cold and bitter in harmony with the night. Genius is rarely unconscious of its power. Basil Gregory and Emile Deschamps were not in the least conceited, but each knew in his heart of hearts that already they approached those heights upon which Tesla and Edison dwelt. They saw the top of the mountain bathed in glorious sunshine, but between them and it there was a great gulf only to be bridged by money.

Basil Gregory's case was, perhaps, the worse of the two, for Basil was in love. Ethel McMahon, the pretty Irish girl, who was English mistress in a young ladies' school in the Fauberg St. Honoré, held all his heart, but she, like him, was poor and friendless, and out of her wretched salary supported an invalid mother, who was a martyr to one of the cruellest forms of arthritis.

The young man ground his teeth in fury against Fate, as he strode by his companion's side. Suddenly he began to talk rapidly, and with a true Parisian vehemence.

"I shouldn't mind so much, Emile, if we wanted money for the reason that such a lot of fellows of our age want it. But we don't. We don't want to play the giddy goat" —*faire la bête* was the French he used – "we don't want to enjoy ourselves in the usual silly way. We only want the world to recognise us for what we are. We want to benefit the whole world, Emile, and for ourselves all we ask is recognition and sufficient to live in comfort."

"It's true," Deschamps replied. "For myself, a flat in central Paris, a motor car to take me quickly to my experimental works, money to travel to America to see all the developments of electricity there – that is all I ask."

"It's much the same with me," the other returned, "except that I want to get married as well and give poor dear Ethel a happy life, and her mother the comforts that she needs. And yet – oh, I'd give anything, *anything*, to get the money for our experiments."

Deschamps shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we cannot rob a church," he said, "and the penalties for any sort of burglary are most unpleasant in France. We must even wait upon Fortune. After all, *mon ami*, our chance may yet come. Every day we read in the newspapers of strange strokes of fortune coming to people. I cannot believe that we shall never have our opportunity. Who knows!" – he threw out an arm with one of the theatrical gestures habitual to men of the South – "who knows but that this very night some very great thing will happen to us! Faith! faith! We must believe, and Fortune will be kind to us. She ever turns away coldly from a faint and despairing heart!"

He took his fancy and embroidered it in a stream of words so vivid, hopeful and full of fancy that he half persuaded the more phlegmatic Englishman by his side. Basil listened in silence, warned

a little, and was not quite so hopeless as he had been. Then, out of mere shame at his own feeling, he stemmed the other's torrent of words.

"That is all very well," he said grimly, "but meanwhile Dame Fortune seems to have deserted us worse than ever. While we have been talking nonsense we have missed our way, and if you can tell me where we are, or whereabouts the Hotel Buonaparte may be lying, I shall be extremely obliged to you, Monsieur Deschamps of the rosy hopes!"

The two men stopped. It was as Gregory had said. That they were near the Seine was obvious, because of the intenser thickness of the fog, but there was no doubt that they had entirely lost their direction. The white mist was as thick as wool, wet, motionless, and icy. Where they stood, upon the pavement, and half-way down a mean, narrow street, the blurred contours of which were perfectly unfamiliar, hardly a sound could be heard. Wheel traffic there was none. The hum of fog-gripped Paris came to them as if from an incredible distance; there was not even a footstep to be heard.

Once more Deschamps shrugged his shoulders. "*Bien*," he said; "yes, we have certainly 'done it this time,' as you say. I have no notion where we are. I am as cold as an iceberg and as hungry as a goat."

They stood looking at each other, though the face of each was an indistinct, pale glimmer. They had gone a little too much to the west, and had lost themselves in the narrow network of mean streets somewhere behind the École Militaire. To reach the Latin Quarter would need considerable ingenuity upon a clear evening when the lamps shone brightly. At the moment it seemed a sheer impossibility.

"Shall we turn back?" Deschamps asked.

Gregory shook his head. "No," he replied. "You pretend to be so intimate with the habits of Fortune, and yet you ask a question like that! Let us go on. We are bound to find our way somehow into some street where there is more life and movement. And if we meet a gang of Apaches – well, we are neither of us weaklings, and we have got a couple of good walking-sticks. Forward, Emile Deschamps! We go to seek our fortune!" And as he said it he laughed with bitter cynicism.

They went on, but as they did so, and when they had walked a hundred and fifty yards or more, the street in which they were grew even narrower and more silent. Every now and then, at long distances, there was a gas lamp, but its yellow light was so muffled by the fog that it hardly penetrated for more than a yard or so, and if the prismatic colours the light made upon the mist were beautiful, they were quite useless to two young gentlemen hungry for supper and far from home.

Emile Deschamps took a box of matches from his pocket, wax ones, which burned immediately without the spectral blue flame of the more general Government article. He lit one – there was not a breath of wind – and held it above his head. The two men walked onwards for a few yards while the feeble light lasted, carefully scrutinising the tall houses which abutted on the pavement. They seemed to consist of small workshops and factories, now blind and deserted. Another match brought them to a stretch of wide wood paling, beyond which rose dim objects seeming like giant mounds or pyramids, and even as the match flickered out it threw its light upon a painted sign.

"Ah!" Deschamps said suddenly. "Now I know! We are in the wood quarter! This is a street of *chantiers de bois*."

Basil groaned. "Good heavens!" he said, "then we *have* come out of our way," for he knew instantly that they had penetrated to that part of Paris where the huge wood-sheds were, where the firewood is cut and stored, and timber for all other purposes is kept. All around them were the great wood stacks and deserted yards. There was not a sound to be heard, and doubtless the few watchmen that were on guard were comfortably sleeping over the stoves in their huts.

"Go on, or turn back?" Deschamps said.

Gregory took a franc from his pocket, and spun it under a gas lamp to which they had just come up. "Heads we go on," he said, and as the coin fell upon the back of his hand, sure enough the figure of Liberty was uppermost.

"That settles it," he said, and once again the boots of the friends rang upon the pavement.

They had travelled for some fifty yards or so, when a rather brighter light than usual came into their view.

"By Jove!" Gregory said, "an electric light at last! I know current is supplied to this neighbourhood because there have recently been representations in the Chamber of Deputies as to the necessity for supplying current to all this part owing to the inflammable nature of the wood. The Société is interested in the matter. I saw some correspondence about it in the office, but the people in this part are very conservative and none too well off, either. Let us have a look."

They came up to the light. It was not a street lamp, but projected from above the door of an old and rather shabby building, and immediately beneath it was a trade sign which could easily be read in the stronger illumination. This was the sign:

CARNET FRÈRES,

Graveurs sur bois Boisage

"Well, here's something," Gregory said, "and by the fact that the light is still on, one may suppose that there is someone inside. It is a wood-engraver's and wood-turner's workshop, you see. Yes, the door's actually open! We will go in and inquire where we are."

As he spoke he pushed open a swing door of wood, from which the paint was peeling, and, followed by Deschamps, entered without further ado.

CHAPTER II

The two young men were conscious of a pleasant sensation of warmth as the door swung to behind them.

They found themselves in a narrow passage, and immediately to their left was a glass window like the window of a conciergerie, one panel of which was open and looked into a dingy office lit by a single gas jet. There was nothing in the office but a safe, a desk round the wall, and some high stools, while a cheap French clock ticked from a bracket upon the wall.

"At any rate, whoever they are, they have not gone," said Deschamps with satisfaction. "Now we shall be all right," and as he said it he rapped loudly with his knuckles upon the little counter in front of the glass partition. They waited for nearly half a minute, but there was no response. Finally Gregory took his walking stick and beat a tattoo upon the counter. The sound of his knocking had hardly died away when footsteps were heard in the distance. They grew nearer, and a door leading into the office behind the partition was pushed open, and a strange and rather startling figure entered.

This was a little man not more than four feet high, wearing a round black cap of alpaca, a green baize apron, and a huge circular pair of spectacles. His face was brown and shrivelled. A fine network of wrinkles was all over it, and beneath the alpaca cap were straggling locks of dingy white. The nose which supported the pair of grotesque horn spectacles was large and bird-like, the mouth below was innocent and kindly.

The little man, in short, looked exactly like the traditional toy or clock maker of Nuremberg in a comic opera, stepping clean off the stage to greet the new-comers.

He looked up at them with a courteous but inquiring glance as he turned up the gas jet and they saw him more clearly. Then, placing two soiled and wrinkled, but delicate and capable, hands upon the counter, he made an odd bow.

"Messieurs?" he said, in a thin, piping voice.

Deschamps raised his hat. "I am sorry to say that my friend and I have lost our way," he began. "The fog is very thick to-night, and it is growing thicker and thicker. We have come quite out of our route, and do not know where we are. We are trying to get to the Latin Quarter, where we live."

The little man raised his hands, and as he did so, both young men noticed how prehensile and delicate they were – the hands of a master workman.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he said, "but you are very far out of your way, indeed, gentlemen. This is the Rue Petite Louise. It is not a thoroughfare at all. It is only a cul-de-sac, which winds among the wood-yards. Between here and the Latin Quarter the district is very congested, and you might walk about all night in a fog like this unless you could find a taxi-cab."

"I am afraid there won't be any cabs abroad to-night in this part of Paris," Gregory broke in. "Well, we must just take our chance. I thank you very much, monsieur."

"But it is impossible!" the odd little creature said with a tiny shriek. "The hour is already late, gentlemen; the fog, as you say, grows thicker every moment. And, look you, on a night like this there will be all sorts of robbers abroad. It is most unsafe."

Deschamps shrugged his shoulders. "Doubtless," he said, "but there is nothing else for it."

The little man on the other side of the counter peered at them anxiously through his great round spectacles. "But, yes," he said, in a plaintive bleat, "if affairs call you home, monsieur – doubtless madame will be distressed – then, indeed you must go, but –"

Deschamps laughed. "No, we have no business; we have finished our work for the day, and we are not married; still –"

"The matter is settled," said the old gentleman, with a child-like smile. "You will do me the honour of coming into our workshop immediately. We have a fire there, soup, bread, and *vin ordinaire* are ready, and there is enough for all. My brother will be as pleased as I am to have the honour of

offering you hospitality on such a night. No" – he waved his hands in reply to a murmur of protest from Deschamps – "we could not let you go. Stay with us until the morning, and we will do our best to make you comfortable as may be."

Eager, chirping and twittering like an excited bird, the odd, old fellow unlatched a half-door, pushed up the counter-flap and bowed them into the little office. In a moment they had passed through it into a long, narrow room with a high roof which seemed to be of glass.

The place was lit by a huge fire of coal and wood, which glowed in an open hearth, and by the side of it was a small forge. The red light streamed out in a mysterious radiance upon a workshop crowded with tools, long tables, stacks of rare and polished woods, and here and there an unfamiliar machine.

The only other light came from two candles stuck upon a bench in their own grease, and the whole effect was startlingly curious and unexpected. It was as picturesque as some carefully set scene upon the stage, and seemed utterly removed from the modern life of a great city. The red light of the fire left distant corners of the workshop in black, impenetrable shadow, making it seem of vast extent.

Around the fire, however, the half-circle of light it threw out showed everything with great distinctness.

Gregory and Deschamps looked round them with bewildered eyes, and then, simultaneously, they gasped.

Rising from an old oak chair, emerging from its depths rather, there came another little man towards them.

In every particular he was exactly like their guide. In that bizarre light, at any rate, hardly anyone could have told them apart, and as he stepped forward he peered at them through identical round spectacles.

"My brother, Edouard," said the old man who had welcomed them. "Edouard, these gentlemen have lost their way in the fog. They are very far from their home, and it would be dangerous for them to seek it to-night without a proper guide. I have accordingly asked them to come in, and begged of them to share our simple supper, and to wait till the fog goes."

"But I am enchanted!" said the second little man, settling his round alpaca cap upon his head and waving his right arm in an expressive pantomime of welcome. "But this is most fortunate, gentlemen. Supper is nearly ready; come to the fire. Charles and myself are delighted to be of service."

The sudden transition from bitter cold and the grey blanket of the fog to this extraordinary place bewildered both the engineers. It was almost as if they moved among the scenes of some fantastic dream, as they sat down upon a bench by the fire, removed their damp hats and overcoats, and looked around them.

Was this really modern Paris? Who were these two kindly, dwarf-like creatures who had welcomed them into this warm, secret place, which seemed like a cavern of the gnomes?

Suddenly Basil Gregory became conscious that "my brother Charles" was standing before him and speaking.

"We are the Carnet Frères," he was saying, "and twin brethren also! I noticed, monsieur, you were startled as Edouard came to greet you. And, *naturellement*, this old workshop of ours is something out of the ordinary way. But we have lived and worked here for twenty years, my brother and I – we have a sleeping-room at the back – and what we do for our living is a small and specialised branch of the wood-worker's trade, and we have the monopoly of it."

Basil bowed. "My comrade, Monsieur Emile Deschamps," he said. "I, myself am an Englishman, and my name is Gregory."

The hands of Brother Charles flickered in front of him. "But it is wonderful!" he said with the pleased surprise of a child with a new toy. "You are English to look at, monsieur. There is nothing of the Latin about you; and yet you speak French as well as I do."

"I have lived nearly all my life in Paris," Basil answered with a smile.

"That accounts for it," the other twittered. "And now I see Brother Edouard is preparing the meal. *Mon Dieu*, Edouard, how hungry these poor gentlemen must be!"

An iron pot was hooked over the fire – a steaming pot, a pot of fragrant promise. From it into stout china bowls Brother Edouard was ladleing thick brown soup.

Brother Charles wheeled round to the long work-bench and began to cut thick slices of bread, to rattle spoons, parade a somewhat dingy cruet, set flat-footed glasses by each bowl, and uncork two bottles of *vin ordinaire*.

Overflowing with hospitality and the most charming child-like excitement, the odd, bird-like hosts served the soup and poured out that cheap table-wine of Paris, which is exactly the colour of permanganate of potash and water.

Basil and Emile sat down without further ado, and for five minutes there was a happy silence. The *pot-au-feu* was rich and nourishing. The wine was exactly that to which the friends themselves were accustomed. The fog and the cold in the ridiculous, inhospitable outside world was quite forgotten, and it seemed as if some malignant fog-curtain in their own brains had now rolled up and disappeared.

The faces of the two young men lost their pinched and discontented look. Anxiety faded from their eyes, and as they passed their cigarette cases to their hosts, and four thin blue spirals of smoke rose out of the red light to be lost in the shadows of the roof, Basil Gregory and Emile Deschamps had lost all thought of care.

It seemed quite natural, perfectly in the order of things, to be sitting there with their fantastic and courteous entertainers in a strange, mediæval setting – two starving wayfarers upon a hillside, taken in to the cave of the kindly gnomes, or the workshop of beneficent magicians.

"Your cigarettes are of the best tobacco, monsieur," said Charles Carnet. "*Au bon fumeur!* My brother and I had expected to spend a lonely evening. Here's to the fortunate chance that brought us guests!"

He tossed off a thimbleful of the purple wine with a flourish.

"But I could wish, gentlemen," said his brother, "that we could have entertained you better, I am afraid we are old-fashioned in our ways, and prefer a simple menage. At any rate, there might have been more light upon the scene. The fire is all very well, but these two candles give hardly any illumination. As a rule, our workshop is lit with electric light, and we also use the current for our lathe. An hour ago, however, there was a 'fizz' and a 'spit' from that porcelain box there in the casing of the electric wires, and, behold! the light went and the lathe will not work. It has happened before, and we must now wait till to-morrow for the electrician to come from the works and put it right for us."

Basil Gregory laughed. "Fate hath many surprises, Monsieur Carnet," he said, "and surely we have been specially sent to your assistance to-night! My friend and I are both electrical engineers attached to the superintending station of the Société Générale at Mont Parnasse. I expect I know what has happened. And I shall be very much mistaken if I cannot put it right for you in two or three minutes."

The little gentlemen were on their feet in a second, chirping and twittering with pleasure.

"*Tiens!* Edouard," said Brother Charles, "we have been entertaining angels unawares!"

"You are right, Charles," said Brother Edouard. "Angels of light."

Gregory and Deschamps went to the opposite wall of the workshop, moving cautiously among the benches, litter of wood-blocks and tools. Deschamps held one of the candles while Gregory deftly unscrewed the round porcelain cap of the cut-out. It was as he suspected, and he pulled out the semi-circular china bridge from its brass clips and showed it to his hosts.

"It is quite simple," he said. "Between this brass screw and this, there is always a soft wire made of tin and lead – fusible metal, we call it. All the current which lights your lamps and runs your lathes passes through the insulated copper wires, but it has to pass through the little lead wire as well. From some reason or other the current gets too strong and might heat the wires and create

a fire; the little lead wire strung on this half-circle melts with the heat, and the current is shut off. That was the spitting noise you heard."

He plunged his hand into a side pocket and withdrew a small coil of fuse wire, which every practical engineer carries, and a screwdriver. In half a minute he had fixed three inches of the soft lead wire into the bridge, and snapped the bridge into its place in the box.

There was a click as the blocks came home, and then, in an instant, the long workshop was flooded with white light, while at the far end of it the motor, and the lathe it drove, began to hum and clatter with a sudden, disconcerting noise.

Edouard Carnet ran to the lathe and pulled down the tumbler switch. The noise stopped, but the brilliant illumination remained, and entirely changed the aspect of the room.

The great fire glowed a dull red now. The shadows shrivelled up into the corners and disappeared. Every object in the workshop was distinct and well-defined.

"A thousand thanks, monsieur," said the little men. "Another glass of wine! We will go back to the fireside and drink in light and comfort."

The four of them found their way back to their seats, and began to talk again. The eyes of the newcomers, however, were straying round the workshop with a curiosity they could hardly disguise. The place had been mysterious before, and strangely picturesque in the half light. It was mysterious no longer, but a picturesqueness lingered still, while there was much that neither of them were able to understand.

Suddenly Deschamps gave an exclamation. His eye had fallen upon something which interested and excited him, something which called up golden visions.

"*Tiens!*" he cried, jumping up from his seat, and going over to the adjacent table. "And what have we here?"

Upon the table was a circular basin – rather larger than an ordinary washing basin – beautifully made of polished black ebony, and with a rim that curved over upon the inside. Upon the inward curve of the basin, at regular distances, were diamond-shaped bosses of bright metal, while the whole of the bottom of the instrument consisted of a series of tin compartments painted black and red alternately, each compartment having a number painted upon it in white. These compartments were fixed to a moving disc, which could be rapidly rotated by means of a silver upright terminating in a sort of capstan, and rising above the sides of the bowl in the exact centre.

Emile Deschamps knew very well what this was. He was of the South. He had been born near that fairy city on the Mediterranean where the Goddess of Chance rules supreme.

"Then you make roulette wheels?" he cried, turning excitedly to the two little men. "But this one is superb! It is larger than you can buy in the shops. It is full size indeed – exactly as they are used at Monte Carlo!"

With fingers that actually trembled, the young man twirled the silver capstan, and immediately the painted slots in the bowl became merged in a trembling blur of colour, as the disc revolved noiselessly, but at great speed.

"It is perfect!" Emile went on, with a chuckle of excitement and delight. "It runs as sweetly and truly as those in the Casino itself! Basil, look here! See how delicate and beautiful this work is!"

The brothers Carnet had risen to their feet also, and were standing side by side. Their bird-like faces were wreathed with gratified smiles. They bowed together like a grotesque toy.

"Messieurs," said Brother Edouard, "we thank you for what you have said. The wheel is, indeed, as you say, a masterpiece! But it would be odd if it were not so, for, for twenty years my brother and myself have done nothing else than make just these wheels. Every single piece of it is our handiwork. We forge the nickel for the pivot and capstan, and we silver-plate it ourselves. We select the wood, we turn it – no other hands but ours touch the wheels. Brother Charles here even turns the ivory balls." He stepped up to the table, pulled out a long drawer, and lifted from it a walnut box lined with green baize, in which were a dozen small balls of ivory, the size of a large marble.

"See!" he cried; "these also!"

Basil had been examining the delicate and beautifully made machine with great interest while the Carnets had been speaking. He also had an eye for perfect workmanship, and it needed not the excited enthusiasm of his friend for him to realise that he saw it here.

At the same time, he could not quite understand the sort of fever into which the sight of the roulette wheel had thrown Deschamps. It seemed exaggerated to the Englishman. Here was good workmanship, it was true. But why this torrent of excited words?

"For twenty years!" Deschamps cried. "Then; indeed, monsieur, that explains it! But surely it cannot pay you to devote your life to this work, though it is certainly the finest I have ever seen, and far superior to anything one can buy in the shops!"

The two brothers chuckled; and then Charles took up the tale.

"Our wheels are not for sale," he said. "I must let you into a little secret, which, as our guests and men of honour, you will preserve. My brother and I make all the roulette wheels for the Casino at Monte Carlo. We have been employed by the Administration for many, many years. As you may well conceive, it is important that these machines should be perfect in every detail. Millions of francs depend upon it. We are retained at a large figure to construct the wheels. Every two years all the wheels at Monte Carlo are changed. There are twelve roulette tables generally in use. Every two years we send twelve wheels and the old ones are returned to us to be broken up. We can just make twelve within the two years. This one is the last of the new batch which will be dispatched to the south in three days in charge of two commissionaires from Monaco, who will never leave them out of their sight until they arrive at their destination."

Basil listened to this explanation with interest. He had never been to Monte Carlo, though, in common with the rest of the world, he had heard many fabulous tales of the great gambling centre of the world. He saw, however, that Emile's imagination was profoundly stirred, and he listened, half dreamily, to the quick fire of eager questions and courteous answers which passed between Deschamps and his hosts.

When this had a little died down, Emile turned to him and noticed his half-abstracted, half-amused expression.

"Ah, *mon ami*," he said, "you wonder at me! This leaves you cold. It means nothing to you. To me, who have been, I myself, in those glittering halls of Chance, upon the edge of the Mediterranean, this machine brings intoxicating visions. It tells of men and women at the last gasp of hope, ruined in fortune, friendless, and with the whole face of the world set against them like a wall of polished brass. It tells me of a man like this entering through the great doors and issuing forth again within a few short hours, rich beyond his rosierest dreams, able to command all that life has to offer, the divine sense of power flowing in his veins, the cold brass wall gone and in its place a garden of roses! See!"

With a swift motion of his hands he picked up one of the little ivory balls and twirled the capstan in the disc. The painted slots began to revolve, more slowly than before.

Then, and obviously with a practised hand, Emile Deschamps held the ball between the thumb and two first fingers of his right hand, gave a swift motion of his wrist, and the little ivory cylinder whirled round the top of the basin under the overhanging lip, with that curious droning sound that no one who has ever heard it can quite forget.

Click! crack! crack! The speed of the ball lessening, it was now rattling upon the diamond-shaped bosses on the side of the bowl, losing momentum with every moment, until it dropped upon the revolving disc below – revolving in the opposite direction to itself.

And now there was a succession of sharp taps, as the little ball was tossed by the edges of the slots hither and thither, furiously jumping from one to the other, flung back for an instant upon the sloping side of the basin, returning to its mad career over the slots.

And then – a sudden final click as it fell to rest. Silence!

Immediately Deschamps put his finger upon the top of the capstan and stopped the revolutions of the slots.

"Seven – red!" he cried. "Ah! if I had put but nine little golden louis upon that number, within a quarter of a minute I should have been richer by six thousand three hundred francs, more than twice what I earn in a whole year, Basil! In twenty little seconds! Now, do you see what this thing may mean?"

Basil found himself strangely affected by his friend's enthusiasm. He knew nothing of roulette. He had occasionally seen a small wheel in a toy shop, but this so concrete illustration of the game startled him more than he would have been willing to admit.

The thin voice of Edouard Garnet broke in. "Yes, monsieur," he said, "that is one vision, but there are others. Who should tell of those unhappy men who have followed the Goddess of Chance even to the very gates of death, until they have opened and closed upon them at last. Somewhere in the kingdom of Monaco there is a hidden graveyard; none know where it is. And in that dishonoured plot lies hundreds of nameless ones, who have yielded up their all – happiness, honour, life – to the ebony basin."

Basil started. The words seemed to come strangely from the actual artificer of the wheel of fortune. Deschamps also looked curiously at the little man, whose face had suddenly gone grey and whose voice trembled. "But, monsieur," he said, in a hesitating voice.

The other made a gesture with his hand. "Yes, yes," he replied, "I well know what you would say – such words come strangely from me or from my brother. But, monsieur" – he tapped the rim of the bowl with a thin hand – "this is the very last of these engines of hell that I or Charles will ever make!"

He paused, struggling with some deep emotion. "We had a nephew," he continued, "my brother and I; the only relative left to us in the world. We loved him as if he had been a son. We saved, invested, and worked solely for him. We are rich, monsieur! Not only have our earnings been large, but we have saved, and invested our savings in safe rents. All, all was to have been his. Aristide was young, clever, and, backed by the fortune we could leave him, would have taken a high place in the world. He had gone to Marseilles on business for us, entrusted with a considerable sum of money. Some friends took him to Monte Carlo – it was only three months ago. He lost this money of ours at the tables – lost it by means of one of the very wheels we had made – and in despair he killed himself, though God knows how gladly we would have forgiven him. We have now completed our last contract for the Administration. We have resigned our position, and for the future others shall make the wheels. We will touch them no more."

"Never again," Charles Carnet echoed his brother, but he looked lovingly at the glittering thing upon the table nevertheless. "No one will make the wheels like us again," he said with a sigh.

The four men, oddly assorted as they were, gathered round the fire once more. There was but little conversation now. They gazed into the glowing heart of coals and wood-blocks, each busily occupied with his own troubled thoughts.

Basil Gregory, warmed and comfortable as he was in body, felt very low in spirits. One of those moments had come to him when life seems a spoilt and futile thing. The future stretched before him in imagination like some great Essex marshland at evening, when the colour fades out of everything, the leaden tides creep inwards from the sea, and the curlews pipe to each other with melancholy voices, like souls sick for love. There was nothing, nothing! A dreary round of ill-paid mechanical duties, a long engagement which would probably never end in marriage, one of the most epoch-making inventions the world could ever know, locked up in his mind and that of his friend, Emile Deschamps.

Thus the thoughts of the poor Englishman, Basil Gregory, as he gazed into the rose-pink and amethyst heart of the fire.

The two old men were sadly remembering the recent loss of the bright-faced boy that had meant everything in their narrow, patient lives.

Sadness lay like a veil upon the faces of all three.

But Emile Deschamps' face was not sad. It was set and rigid. Not a feature of it moved. The brow was wrinkled and knotted with thoughts. There was a fixed and smouldering fire in the eyes. Once Basil looked at his friend and wondered what intense and concentrated thought was burning and glowing in the great executive brain of the Southerner. Had he known, had an inkling of it reached him, he would have leapt to his feet in the wildest excitement he had ever known.

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