Russian Roulette
By Georges Surdez

The strange case of Sergeant Burkowski, who died many deaths, and his friend Feldheim, who had to explain one of them to their superior officers.

Before long, nobody would gamble or bet with him. And he grew so nervous that it was pitiful. One night, after we had finished dinner, he takes out his revolver, a '92 model, and looks at it. "Feldheim," he says, "did you ever hear of Russian Roulette?"

When I said I had not, he told me all about it. When he was with the Russian army in Rumania, around 1917, and things were cracking up, so that their officers felt that they were not only losing prestige, money, family and country, but were being also dishonored before their colleagues of the Allied armies, some officer would suddenly pull out his revolver, anywhere, at the table, in a cafe, at a gathering of friends, remove a cartridge from the cylinder, spin it back in place, put it to his head and pull the trigger. There were five chances to one that the hammer would set off a live cartridge and blow his brains all over the place. Sometimes it happened, sometimes not. When it did, there was nothing more to be said or done; when it didn't, the fellow waited another day.

And as he explained, Burkowski removed a cartridge from the gun, spun the cylinder with his thumb, snapped it shut without looking at it. He said something about me never understanding the thrill of it, put the muzzle against his temple, and pressed the trigger. There was a click.

He grinned and seemed to feel better. At least six times during the winter, Lieutenant, he did the same thing. It made me very nervous, as I knew I would have to give explanations.

A month ago, he gets a letter from England. He had had a sister there, who had married a wealthy Briton. He was sitting and felt the money would soon be gone, and that stinking life would go on. He said "stinking life." And he told me he would give himself a chance to escape it. This time he took out five cartridges and left one, reversing the order of chances. And he was doing the same thing. He spun the cylinder under the table, snapped it shut. I tried to argue with him, and he laughed at me.

"Listen," I started to tell him, "you'll lose this time, and I'll explain why."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"No. But I have a theory as to why..."

I wanted to go on.

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"You Germans and your theories!" he said. "I'll bet you one thousand francs you're wrong and that I won't kill myself!"

I wanted to explain what I meant, but he stopped me: "Back your opinion with money or keep quiet." And he laid a thousand-franc note on the table. I signed it and I gave him for that, more than I could have collected in two installments a month apart. "Now, what's your theory?"

I told him that when he spun the cylinder, he always used the same gesture of the thumb, probably halting the rotation with an unconscious gesture at a given point, and that this movement of the cylinder, always starting from one chamber, brought that chamber in line with the hammer and barrel after a revolution and a half. That seemed to puzzle him, but he understood. So I suggested that we call the bet off.

"The girl was nearest Benbow. She had waited in that smoky dark until he had spoken; and her look was cool and calm: "Johnny's no harm." Benbow heard her shuffle away. He turned a little, carefully listening, and his boot struck the yielding shape of Carter in the corner. A match flared and afterward the girl lifted a lantern upward, its light showing the wild shine of her eyes. The shapes of Carter and Turk were curled lifeless on the floor; and Johnny stood across the room with his hands slowly rising above a strained, sickness face. Smoke curled more thickly in the room; and fire leaped up through the stove's pipe hole. The table's legs and top had smashed. The girl put the lantern on the floor and wheeled at Johnny and seized the man by the belt. She came out to Benbow, handing the weapon to him and for a little while stared up at him. Her hair dropped irregularly across her forehead and her lips were softly parted and reverent breathing quickened the rise and fall of her breasts."

She murmured: "You got a wife?"

He retorted, "Let him die." But a little of the strange shining left her eyes. She shrugged her shoulders and let them drop in a gesture of resignation and brought her lips together. Johnny crossed the room and bent above Turk. He said after a while: "Breakin'." It was the fire shooting out of the stove that bothered Johnny the most. "Darn it, place is goin' to burn up if we don't stop that."

"Let it burn," breathed the girl. "We got to do somethin'," insisted Johnny.

"Let them die—and let the house burn."

(To be continued next week)

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