

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

LIEUTENANT:

An official request for further explanations concerning the death by suicide of Sergeant Burkowski last month has arrived from Regimental Headquarters in Meknes. Before making another report of the affair, I believe it is better to inform you of the circumstances, so that you may advise me about what to say and what not. In my nine years in the Foreign Legion this exact situation never came up before. I may seem to criticize a man who is not only a dead man but who was also my superior in rank. The Lieutenant has known me for some years and cannot misunderstand my honest intentions.

A few months ago, I was sent here to Bou Khous Blockhouse to replace the second in command, invalidated to Algeria at his own request. I liked Sergeant-Chief Burkowski from the start, there never was a quarrel between us, no bad words exchanged—unless you count the times when he would say, "Feldheim, you thick-skulled German," and, if there were no inferiors about to overhear, I would say something about "crazy Russians." I am aware, of course, that personalities and nationalities are against regulations in the Legion, but the Lieutenant knows how such things go.

Sergeant Burkowski, as you may know, talked like all Russians. That is, he was a bit boastful about what he had been, how much money he had had, the schools he had been to. And, like all Russians, he thought he was a gambler. He would gamble or bet on anything, any time, whether he had the money to pay or not. And he was very lucky. I do not gamble as a rule, but what with boredom here in the mountains and the fact that he was my superior, from time to time I would risk small sums which he invariably won. On anything—the number of nails missing in a Legionnaire's boots, a date in history, how many shots would be fired by some sniper during the night.

THOSE small sums, when added at the end of a month, amounted to more than you might think.

One month, September, my entire pay went to Sergeant Burkowski. I decided to stop playing with him and told him so. He said that he was not surprised, that Germans were methodical, not speculative, and that this was both their strength to start with and their weakness at the end. I let that go. He was my superior.

And he is dead and cannot be brought to account, and as this is a private communication, Lieutenant, I may say that Sergeant Burkowski craved gambling so badly that he would gamble even with the Legionnaires. Four different times I warned him it was not right for a sergeant to play cards or bet with corporals and privates. But he told me he knew more about Communism than I would ever learn, and that discipline was not maintained by growls and kicks in the pants anywhere except in Germany. That is an exaggeration. I have known men who had served in the German army and had never been kicked. But I could not argue with him, a superior.

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 me.

"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 café, at a gathering of friends, remove a cartridge from the cylinder, spin the cylinder, snap 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 Britisher long before the war. She had died and he was inheriting part of her money. As nearly

as we could figure, it was almost a million francs. His enlistment had six months to run, then he would be free to spend the money. He had not seen his sister in twenty years, and did not feel badly on her account.

I made a foolish remark about his having been lucky not to shoot himself. That made him smile queerly. He told me that 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 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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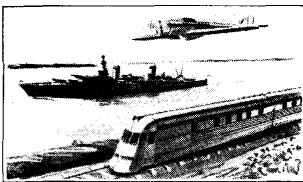
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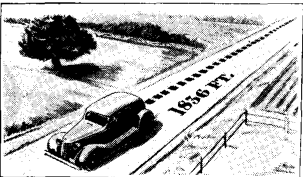
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his fire. A shadow sprang straight at him, which was Turk coming on with his slow-witted mind locked up and past changing now. Benbow brought the gun brutally down upon that shadow and struck nothing but the sheering point of a shoulder. A moment later he had been caught by Turk's two heavy arms, with Turk's head driving the breath out of him. He dropped. Yet, in dropping, he tripped the burly Turk and threw all his weight against the man.

THE heat of the stove rushed across Benbow's face and flamed on his eyes as he fell over it with Turk beneath him and cushioning him from its red-hot surface. It was Turk's body that lay on that dull-shining stove, with the smell of burning hair and flesh and clothes rolling up its stench. Turk was screaming the way a woman would scream and Turk's great muscles bulged against Benbow. But his legs gave a mighty push and then the stove collapsed on its legs and the pipe fell down and smoke and flame lent its sulphurous light to the place and Benbow was rolling with Turk on the rough floor boards.

He was half across Turk's body—and Turk lay there without fight, his breathing rushing in and out and a pure agony gutting up from his throat. There was no mercy in Benbow then. He reached down and found Turk's gun belt and ripped out the revolver and laid one sharp blow across Turk's head.

He said, then: "Johnny."
The kid's voice sailed back at him, ragged from fear: "I don't want to fight."

The girl was nearest Benbow. She had waited in this smoky dark until he had

spoken; and her talk 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 and lifeless on the floor; and Johnny stood across the room with his hands slowly rising above a strained, sickened face. Smoke curled more thickly in the room; and fire licked up through the stove's pipe hole. The table's legs and top lay smashed. The girl put the lantern on the floor and wheeled at Johnny and seized the gun from his belt. She came over 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 an accented breathing quickened the rise and fall of her breasts.

She murmured: "You got a wife?"
"See if Turk's alive, Rody."
She 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: "Breathin'." It was the fire shooting out of the stove that bothered Johnny the most. "Damn' 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."

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Russian Roulette

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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 him a paper for that much, to be 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, then he understood. So I suggested that we call the bet off.

But he grew quite angry, and insisted on doubling the stakes. He was sure I was wrong, he said, because if I were right, it meant that he had been cheating fate unintentionally. In any case, he continued, the movement could not possibly be the same with five empty chambers as with five full chambers. The weight would cause an alteration. I told him the change in weight would be too slight to make any difference, and he made another bet on that.

I said to look at the gun and see. But he kept it hidden, and shoved his money out.

By that time I was very angry at his foolishness, and had forgotten, almost, that it meant his life. The equivalent of three months' pay was there on the table, signed away if he lived after pressing the trigger. It was a very nasty moment, Lieutenant, when I did not know what to hope for.

He brought up the gun with a quick

movement, put the muzzle against his temple. There was a click.

He had won again!
We had a couple of drinks together after that. I felt pretty low, because he had tricked me again into betting, and even though I was glad he was alive, I couldn't forget I was a fool. We separated and I took up my turn of guard while he went to bed. Much later, he comes in and hands me my signed slips and his money.

He told me that his conscience bothered him, that he had cheated. For, as I was talking, he had slowly turned the cylinder, under the table, changing the position of the chambers! And he himself did not know whether I had been right or wrong. Because he could not remember in which direction he had turned.

I BELIEVED him and believe him now. Burkowski was ashamed. He mumbled a lot about having been a gentleman. I told him not to be crazy, to forget it. And he was after me for two hours, trying to get me to try the bet all over again. But I was not to be caught a second time. I refused.

He went away again, and not long after I heard the shot that killed him. I wondered whether he had tried the bet all over again, privately. But when I examined the weapon, I discovered that all the chambers had been loaded.

I hope the Lieutenant can tell me how to arrange this story so that it may satisfy the authorities. It is not quite clear to me whether it would be right to reveal that he had shot himself for cheating. On the other hand, have I the right to falsify an official report?

Respectfully yours,
HUGO FELDHEIM,
Sergeant Third Foreign Infantry.

They often
go hand in hand
—winter discomforts
and low general
resistance!



If you think back at past winters, you'll probably recall that January and February have always been months of special hazard for you. You've had to be extremely cautious not to be affected by common winter discomforts.

Newer scientific facts help to explain why. You find it more difficult to keep well in these particular months because it's the time of year when your *general resistance* is likely to be low!

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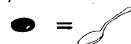
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