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# The CHAIRS OF STUYVESANT BARON

By  
VICTOR ROUSSEAU



"His screams were those of a man in mortal agony."

**A**MONG the numerous investigations which Dr. Ivan Brodsky made in my company I recall the case of Stuyvesant Baron's furniture, because of the poetic justice which it brought about. Rarely, indeed, did any visitor from the unseen world so thoroughly justify his appearance as in this instance, or work such permanently beneficial effects upon the character of his victim.

We had seen no one for several days, being engaged upon a study of peculiar delicacy in connection with the pituitary body in the brain of a chimpanzee, when, one afternoon, a loud and important voice in the parlor followed the announcement of the doctor's servant. The visitor had insisted upon entering, he said, and he had been compelled to admit him rather than suffer a scene outside. Brodsky smiled rather grimly, put down the brain of the ape, and went

out into the ante-chamber, motioning to me to follow him.

"Dr. Brodsky," began our visitor, "when I tell you that I am Mr. Stuyvesant Baron, you will at once know all about me. You have been recommended to me by a friend of mine, whose name is immaterial, as likely to serve my purpose, and you shall be well paid for your work. I want you to come down at once to my country home in Pennsylvania."

He was a pompous individual, some fifty years of age, well oiled and soaped and starched. A huge signet ring overlapped his little finger, a gold watch-chain stretched across his waistcoat, and he had that atmosphere of indescribable vulgarity and overbearingness that is associated with the newly enriched. I knew the man by reputation as a prominent politician at the capital, who had achieved a large fortune recently by rather dubious transactions. I looked to Dr. Brodsky to give him the *coup*

NOTE—This is the eighth in a series of stories, each complete in itself, dealing with Dr. Ivan Brodsky. "The Surgeon of Souls."

*de grâce* courteous; then from the twinkle in Brodsky's eyes I perceived that he was reserving this for our future delectation.

"Your name is well known to me, Mr. Baron," he answered. "But won't you take a chair and tell me first what your difficulty is? Pray be seated."

Mr. Baron reached toward a chair and sat down gingerly upon the extreme edge, apparently surprised that it did not collapse under him.

"Well, perhaps I'd better begin at the beginning and explain the matter," he said. "You have heard, no doubt, of my influence in the capital, and how I worked my way up, from quite humble beginnings, to my present position. Well, sir, it was always the dream of my life to own one of them country estates which it's the correct thing for a man of my status to have. I've had my eye on one for a long time, a fine place but sadly run down. It was owned by an old Southern family—plenty of ancestors, but beggarly as church mice and not a dollar to their credit. Yes, they'd fallen into disrepute, and let the place run down. I'd been waiting for them to put it on the market, and as soon as it was advertised for sale I went to see it and I said, 'Stuyvesant, that's yours.' My wife's away in Europe—comes back next month, and I thought I'd buy it and fit it up for a surprise for her. Well, Doc, I bought it.

"There's a hundred acres or more goes with it, and naturally when I bought the place I thought I'd gotten rid of those beggarly Southerners for good and all. Well, first thing I knew they'd moved to a little cottage they own just across the boundary and installed themselves there, spoiling the view of the crick for me. I've been trying to put them out ever since, and I think I've got them nailed now. However, that's by the way.

"When I looked inside of my new house I nearly died of laughing. Never saw such a ramshackle-looking interior in my life, Doc. Purse-proud snobs that they were, they'd sold off everything to keep up their station, and except for a score of dirty old chairs, two beds, and some tables, there wasn't hardly a bit of furniture in the house. First thing I did was to pitch that lumber out of the house. They saw it lying there and begged me to sell it to them. I told them to take it and decay with it, which they duly did. Then I sent for an upholsterer and ordered a fine suite in red plush for the dining room, blue plush for the bedrooms and green plush for the rest of the house. Yes, sir, I've fixed the place up fit for a gentleman.

"I moved in last week to warm up the house for my wife. Got the servants in and all, was ready to surprise her when she came back. I went to bed the first night and had a good sleep. In the morning, going round to make a final inspection, I saw one of them wretched old chairs that had been left in the hall by mistake. I'm a hot-tempered gentleman, Doc, and it made me so mad I kicked it over. Then I went into the dining room and sat down in an arm-chair to cool off. First thing I knew, something like a tack was sticking into me. I jumped up with a yell and my man came running in. 'You clumsy loon,' I cried, 'what'd you mean by leaving a tack in here?' The man looked at it. 'There's no tack here, sir,' he said.

"I tried another chair: same thing. It was like sitting on a red-hot poker. The man thought I was mad, I guess. Well, Doc, to cut the story short, there's not a chair in the house I can sit down on, except that dirty old broken affair that I kicked out into the lot. And there it rests. I've been sitting on it ever since. I couldn't go to a doctor and have him

call me a lunatic and lose my influence, so I came to you."

"May I ask how you happen to conclude that this trouble was of supernatural origin?" asked Brodsky.

"Why, to tell the truth," said Mr. Baron, "the house was supposed to be haunted. That's one of the reasons why I bought it; it gives it tone. And I didn't care to tell you, but the fact is they pinch me. I'm black and blue," he ended mournfully. Somehow his pompous demeanor seemed to be subsiding under the doctor's influence.

"When you sit down?" asked Brodsky.

"At all times, sir," cried the man angrily. "The only time they don't pinch me in that house is when I'm sitting in that dirty old chair. They pinch me when I'm sitting and when I'm standing, and when I'm in bed. Fancy me giving up the place because I'm pinched by ghosts! I'd lose my influence at once. There's mighty little place for cranks and lunatics in this world, sir. So I want you to come down right away, and if you can stop this game it will mean \$10,000 in your pocket. If you can't, I'll give you five."

Brodsky looked at him rather sternly. "I do not accept money for this class of work," he said. "I will endeavor to allay the trouble if you will make me out a check for \$10,000 to be devoted by me to any cause I please."

Baron stared at him for a moment; then his face softened into a grin.

"Oh, all right, Doc, all right," he said, writing a check and signing it. "There's some swallows their medicine straight and some wants it chocolate-coated. I've met both kinds. Here you are—and put it to any purpose you please," he continued, with a loud guffaw.

IT WAS arranged that Brodsky and I should go down at the end of the week. About noon on the following Saturday we found ourselves at the little country village near which the mansion was situated. The coachman who drove us up was loud in his lamentations over the change of ownership.

"He's a low-down, mean cuss," he exclaimed emphatically. "The Darrells had owned it for nigh on a hundred and fifty years and he bought it over their heads when they couldn't pay the mortgage. I don't blame him for that so much, but he's trying to put them out of their cottage, too; that's mortgaged and he won't give them a month's extension; hates to see 'em, I reckon."

At the door of his new residence Mr. Baron received us somewhat moodily.

"Come in, gents," he exclaimed, rubbing his leg. "They've been at me like mosquitoes all morning," he continued. "Pinch, pinch—it ain't the pain, it's the indignity, and James thinks me crazy, hitting out at the air so much. This is the dining room."

It was the most fearsomely incongruous thing that I had ever seen. The old oak paneling had been covered with scarlet paper, furniture in bright red plush coverings was scattered throughout the room, and on two sides were huge mirrors with great gilt frames that reflected the vulgar aspect of the owner as he paced to and fro. Drawn up to the table was a plain wooden chair, apparently of antique workmanship, and singularly pleasing to the eye when contrasted with the rest of the paraphernalia. Suddenly our host leaped a foot into the air and struck out wildly. At the same instant, in the mirror that faced us, I saw for a fleeting second the horrified features of the footman in the hall.

"You'll excuse me if I sit down," said Mr. Baron, sinking into the wooden chair. "I give in. I'm here until you drive them away. James!" he called, and the footman appeared instantly at the door, his face again composed. "James, serve dinner here. I don't know whether they'll pinch you, gentlemen," he added, "but you can try if you like."

I sat down with some apprehension, but neither Brodsky nor I experienced the least uneasiness.

"With your permission," said the doctor, "we will take a short walk over to the Darrell's cottage and inspect these other chairs. Which way is it?"

"Over there, down by the crick," said Baron contemptuously. "I suppose you know your business. But say, Doc," he went on anxiously, "you're not going to let on about me, are you? Good Lord, what a scoop for them! They hate me like poison. It'd be my political finish."

"Not a word," said the doctor, and we went out.

A WALK of a few minutes brought us to the cottage, a pretty little place, from which the mansion was just visible. The wife received us with hospitality and without inquiring our business, after the Southern custom. Brodsky soon drew her out, while the daughter and young son sat by in silence.

"I don't blame Mr. Baron for buying the place over our heads," said the woman. "We couldn't have kept it up after my husband died, and we knew it had to go. But he's taken over the mortgage on this cottage and threatens to put us out next week and raze it to the ground. Heaven knows what will happen to us, for we're at the end of our resources. All our poor furniture wouldn't net us a hundred dollars."

"Ah! Pretty old chairs, eh?" said Brodsky, looking around him.

"They were good in their day," said Mrs. Darrell with some slight touch of pride. "Mr. Darrell's great-grandfather brought them over from England before the revolution. They made good furniture in those days—better than they do now—and if they don't look pretty, they've worn well. But they've about outlived their usefulness. Peters, the traveling peddler, has offered me fifteen dollars for the nine of them, and he'll be here tomorrow. I'm thinking of letting them go."

"They're an heirloom, I see, like the family ghost," said Brodsky pleasantly.

The woman started and cast a dubious glance toward him.

"You've heard about that, then?" she asked, coloring faintly. "They do say there is a ghost, although it never troubled any of us."

"Whose is it? The man's who made the chairs?"

"No, indeed," Mrs. Darrell answered. "It is supposed to be the spirit of the old gentleman who willed the chairs to my husband's great-grandfather. Mr. Darrell used to visit him constantly at his English estate before he died. The old fellow had become greatly attached to his chairs, and in his last days, when his mind had given way a little, he used to think he had made them. He told Mr. Darrell that he would always be near them, and that they should never leave his descendants as long as they lasted. He left them to Mr. Darrell because he was almost as proud of them as the old gentleman himself; they were both fond of good furniture, and the maker—I forget his name—had quite a reputation. He died the year before Mr. Darrell emigrated. We used to play at table-turning sometimes, and the chairs used to dance all round the table and rap out all sorts of nonsense in the form of acrostics. I thought it was the old

gentleman in his crazy moods, but my husband said it was nothing but animal magnetism."

"Well, his prophecy has come true," said the doctor, "for they have certainly followed you here, and I shouldn't be very surprized if they should remain with you after all. But now I have a favor to ask of you. There have been some curious manifestations in the mansion, and we are going to hold a seance there. Will you come and sit with us? It is imperative for its success."

At first Mrs. Darrell stoutly refused. But when the doctor had set his mind upon anything he usually got it. What arguments he used to persuade her I can not recall; it seems to me now that it was his hypnotic powers that finally overcame her natural reluctance. Anyhow, five minutes later we three were strolling amicably toward the mansion.

We found Mr. Baron waiting for us in his chair, a gloomy expression upon his face. At the sight of Mrs. Darrell he sprang to his feet with an oath—and promptly collapsed with a yell and began rubbing himself.

"Mr. Baron," said Brodsky, "Mrs. Darrell has consented to sit with us at our seance, and her presence is absolutely necessary for its success. She knows nothing," he added in a whisper. "Sit in your chair and she will discover nothing."

"She'll learn that they've been pinching me, won't she?" shouted Mr. Baron, forgetting all caution.

"No, for I have already thrown her into a hypnotic condition," returned the doctor. "I would not bring her under false pretenses, but I have already sealed her ears so she can not hear you." He turned to the woman. "Mrs. Darrell," he said, "there is nobody in that chair."

"Why, of course not," she re-

turned, looking at the doctor in some surprize.

Baron's mouth opened and his eyes almost protruded from his plump face. A low, wordless growl came from his throat.

"You told me I should meet Mr. Baron," said the woman.

"He is in the house, but you will neither see nor hear him," answered the doctor. "But come, let us take our places for the seance."

WE CLOSED the doors, drew up a small table into the center of the room, and arranged three chairs around it, Baron, remaining where he sat, making the fourth. At a signal from the doctor I lowered the gas jet, so that only a faint light remained, just strong enough to enable us to see each other's faces. Mrs. Darrell sat between myself and Brodsky, with Baron facing us. We sat there for about five minutes; then the table began to tremble, as though some convulsion were taking place internally. Then two faint raps were heard.

"Is anybody there?" asked Brodsky. "Louder, please. Now, my friend, we want to find out your grievances and draw up a peace treaty with you. What is your name?"

He ran slowly through the alphabet. When he arrived at the twenty-fifth letter a loud rap resounded upon the table.

"The letter Y," said Brodsky. "Now the next letter please. A, B, C, D. . . ." The rap sounded at O. The next letter was U, and the next R. Then came five or six little raps together, indicating the termination of the word.

"Your!" said the doctor. "It sounds like the termination of an epistle. Let's have the next word, then."

The rapping began again as Dr. Brodsky went through the alphabet.

The letters spelled out in succession were L, I, T, T, L, and E. Then again came the terminal sign. And the last word was "dahlia."

"Your little dahlia!" said Brodsky impatiently. "That's the worst of the seance," he continued to me, rather in an aside. "It attracts a mischievous and prankish form of elemental spirit whose messages, even when comprehensible, are mostly a tissue of lies. It is the least valuable of any means of psychic investigation, but, unfortunately, in this case our only resource. I suppose we have got to be duped by some half-human intelligence of the usual low order."

There came two thunderous raps upon the table—the accepted signal for "no."

"You protest, do you, my friend?" said Brodsky grimly. "Very well, then, you shall have another chance. Now, perhaps, you will tell us your proper name."

Three loud raps indicated willingness and Brodsky began to spell out the alphabet again. This time the signature was different. It contained three words, as before, and they were "Jim, the Penman."

"I fancy I see some method in this madness," said the doctor, ignoring the three raps that joyfully assented to this remark. "And I fancy that our prankish friend will have still another signature upon the third attempt. Now, sir, let us have the end of the charade."

The alphabet was slowly spelled out once more. This time the signature ran "Chips, the Carpenter."

"Aha!" said the doctor. "Just as I expected. Yes, my friend, I understand your carefully veiled allusions. And now, perhaps you will afford us some indication of your desires."

Hardly had the words left the doctor's mouth when a scream burst from Baron's lips. In the dim light,

to which our eyes were now becoming accustomed, I saw him slide suddenly from his chair to the floor—or, rather, the chair seemed to be pulled violently from beneath him, as a mischievous schoolboy might have done to some venerable elder. And then the chair stood up solemnly upon its back legs and began tilting backward and forward, kicking the prostrate man, much as a thug might kick his wife when he returned home drunk. Drunk, indeed, seems to be the word most suitable, for the thing balanced itself gravely and deliberately, but withal with difficulty, in the intervals between the kicks. Then, as Baron slid forward, screaming, into the center of the room, I saw the thing begin to sidle at him, butting him like a goat. Finally, withdrawing a foot or more to gain momentum, it waddled solemnly forward, mounted his prostrate form, and executed a clumsy dance upon the most prominent portion of his waistcoat.

I am afraid that all the sympathy which I should have felt was extinguished in that burst of Homeric laughter that came from the doctor's lips, in which I joined. There we sat by the table, rocking to and fro, speechless and apoplectic, while the chair executed its solemn ritual, now performing a *pas de seul* upon his chest, and again balancing itself upon one leg, apparently irresolute what antic it should next perform. And all the while Baron screamed like an insane man, yet so paralyzed by his terror that he could not move. I knew that James would break into the room, for the screams outrang our laughter, and were those of a man in mortal agony. But I was not prepared for the denouement.

I heard a shuffling in the hall, the door was flung wildly open, and a towering figure appeared in the doorway, that of a woman. For one instant she hesitated; then without a



word, by instinct, as it seemed, she found the exact location of the low gas jet and turned it on. There were we at the table, red in the face, there was Mrs. Darrell beside us, watching us in surprize and not understanding, there lay Baron upon the floor, dusty and battered, gripping with all his might the leg of the now innocuous chair that seemed to have become entangled with his head. And then I realized that Mrs. Baron had returned from Europe.

She drew herself up to her full six feet of height and glared at us with a single comprehensive gaze.

"Stuyvesant, get up," she hissed.

And the fear-stricken wretch rose slowly and painfully to his feet and stood before her like a delinquent schoolboy in the presence of his master.

"So this is the way you have been enjoying yourself while I have been away!" she cried. "These are the orgies you have been indulging in with these low creatures at your country seat, as you were pleased to call it in your letters to me! You thought you could hoodwink me, your wife, after twenty years of unhappy married life. But I'll keep my eyes on you from this night forward. You shall not get the divorce you have been counting on," she went on, becoming for the first time hysterical.

The doctor half rose from his chair. In an instant the woman had staggered to her husband's side.

"Oh Stuyvesant, protect me from these ruffians," she cried. "My poor Stuyvesant, they have lured you here to rob and murder you. Come, leave this house and never set foot in it again." She fell upon his neck. "My poor husband!" she sobbed; "hold me up, hold me up; I am going to faint."

She promptly did, and it required the united efforts of Brodsky and myself to brace her up.

We got her to a lounge at last in another room. Baron was at her side; outside I heard the chug-chug of the automobile as James prepared it for the night journey. Nothing would have induced Mrs. Baron to spend a night in the new home. In one interval between her almost constant hysterics her husband stole out to us. He looked very different from the pompous creature who had come into the doctor's office a few days before.

"I'm glad," he cried. "I'm glad. All hell seems loose tonight. I wouldn't stay here for—I wouldn't stay for—a street railroad franchise," he spluttered. "And I'm ruined. I've been kicked by a chair. I've been kicked by a chair, an old, dirty chair that I threw out into the lot. What'll they say about me at the capital?"

"Nothing," said the doctor. "Neither of us will breathe a word of this, and nobody else sees or hears you."

"Whom are you speaking to, Mr. Brodsky?" asked Mrs. Darrell, nervously. "I don't see anybody."

Baron stared at her in wild incredulity and hope. Then his mind went working backward. "I've got a white elephant on my hands," he cried. "Nobody will buy the place, it's so out-of-the-way. I'd take ten thousand for it," he cried hopelessly.

"I'll give you ten thousand for it," said the doctor.

"A bargain. When?"

"Now," he replied. "A verbal agreement. Are you content?"

"Done," answered Baron. Then Brodsky took out the check he had received and handed it to him. Baron looked at it and his face turned green. He spun round on his heel and left us, and the fragments of the paper descended in a cloud behind us.

Brodsky turned to Mrs. Darrell. "This is your home," he said.

“**B**UT who was the spirit?” I asked the doctor a few hours later.

“Have you never played charades?” he asked. “What were the names? ‘Your little dahlia;’ ‘Jim, the Penman;’ and ‘Chips, the Carpenter!’ Reverse the order, and what syllables do we obtain?”

“Chip-pen-dale!” I exclaimed with sudden inspiration.

“Exactly,” said Brodsky. “Of course, it was not the famous maker of chairs himself, but the old gentleman who, as Mrs. Darrell told us, imagined himself to be Chippendale, and talked in acrostics. No doubt the insult to his chair when it was flung into the lot inspired him with the desire to be revenged.”

“But surely he would not still be insane after a hundred years of spirit life!” I said. “That offers up rather hopeless chances for those of us who die deranged in mind.”

“Only when he returned to this earth sphere,” replied the doctor. “Then he would naturally take on characteristics which he possessed on leaving it. But a hundred years is an unusually long period for a spirit to manifest itself upon this earth, and I think it is highly probable that, now that the Darrells are restored to their own home, he will pass on to higher spheres and cease to revisit us.”

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A strange tale indeed is the next story in this series, “The Man Who Lost His Luck,” which will be published in next month’s *WEIRD TALES*.