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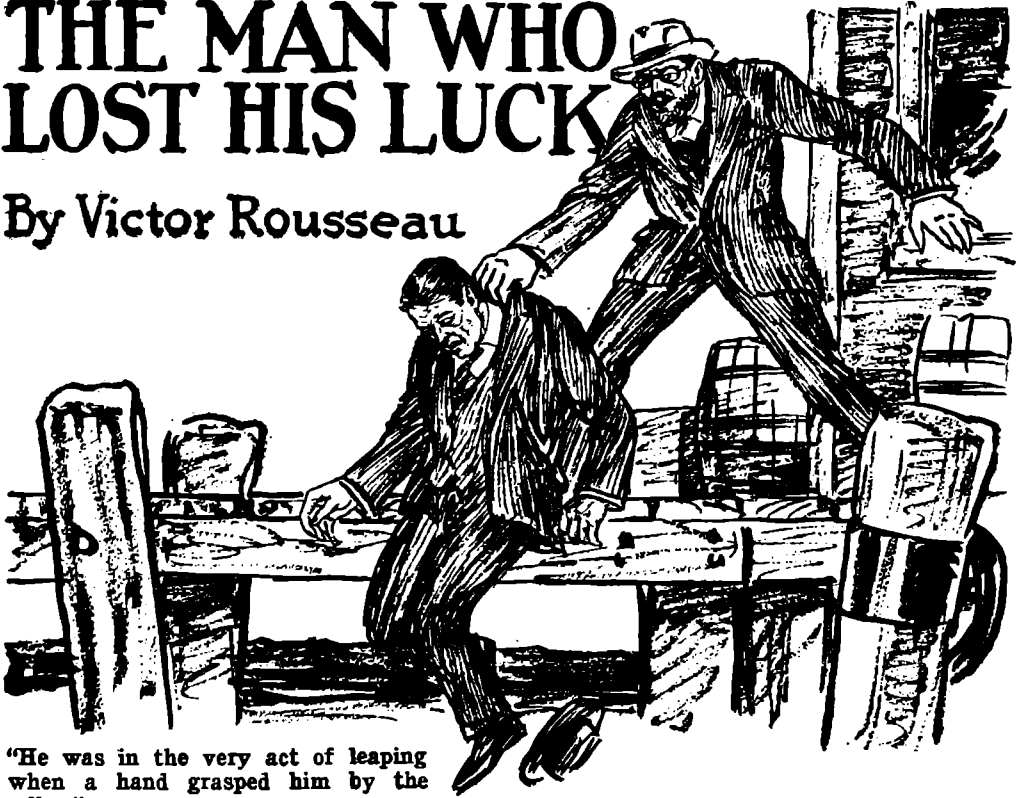
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THE MAN WHO LOST HIS LUCK

By Victor Rousseau



"He was in the very act of leaping when a hand grasped him by the collar."

I MUST confess that I have not told the truth concerning the beginning of my relations with Dr. Ivan Brodsky, in whose company I witnessed so many marvels of psychological experiment. I have said that I became his secretary through our association at the hospital, where I was one of his lecture class. That is true; nevertheless, I have omitted—through shame, I must confess—the story of the experiences that brought about our intimacy.

I was desperate with ill fortune. Everything had gone against me. I had graduated from the hospital the year before, rashly married upon the strength of an expected position which never materialized, attempted to practise without obtaining a sin-

gle patient a week, and finally found ruin at my side. What little fortune I had left was lost when the great panic of '93 swept over the country. Is it a wonder that I resolved to seek that oblivion which I foolishly believed would be attained by suicide?

It was a dark November evening and I was standing upon the extremity of the deserted wharf, ill-clad, hungry, and homeless. I remember how I looked at the black, oily water flowing swiftly beneath me, gathering resolution to jump. At last I attained it; I stepped back a few paces, and was in the very act of leaping when a hand grasped me by the collar and forcibly arrested me in mid-air. It was then that, looking back at my rescuer, I discovered that it was the doctor who had saved me.

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

"My luck!" I groaned. "It follows me, even here!"

Then, my nerve gone, I broke into unrestrainable sobs, while the doctor waited patiently at my side. He knew me; I had not thought he remembered any of us, for he had seemed very self-absorbed when he lectured to the classes.

"I heard of you only today," he said, "and that you had had ill fortune. They told me at your tenement that you strolled upon the dock at nights; some fortunate instinct brought me here in the critical moment. Come home and be my guest for tonight; I have no doubt that I can make you see your prospects in a very different manner by tomorrow." And, by the exercise of his strange power of compulsion, he forced me to comply.

A change of clothing and a steaming hot supper did, I admit, work wonders. I had not realized before how much my physical weakness, induced by privations, had contributed to my despondency. Late in the evening, when I was sitting in his study enjoying a cigar, he drew me out.

"And so that is my story," I summed up in conclusion. "Six months ago I was a man of some little means, married, and looking forward to a successful career. Today I am a penniless outcast, homeless and desperate. All I had in the world has been swept away, my wife has left me, perforce, to go to her parents, my self-respect has utterly gone, and but for your intervention I should now be lying at the bottom of the canal. But my ill luck would not even leave me a quiet exit from life."

"Hm!" commented Brodsky. "You claim that what is vulgarly called a 'streak' of ill luck has struck you?"

"Everything has gone against me," I answered. "The most amazing combinations seem to be pursu-

ing me. It is almost as if some mocking power were persecuting me. For instance, two weeks ago today I was forced to vacate my medical offices in Pitt Street. I had not had a patient during three weeks, and never more than the poorest clientele. One hour after I had gone, so I learned afterward, I was summoned to the house of Mr. Van Wybergh, the millionaire, to attend a member of his family who was dangerously ill. The case would have meant five hundred dollars to me. And today I lost my last five-dollar gold piece out of a hole in my pocket."

"Well, well, let's see," said Brodsky. "If I remember, you fellows at the hospital used to be famous poker players. Let's play a few rounds." He took a pack of cards from a table drawer and dealt the hands. I had the king, queen, nine and eight of hearts and the eight of spades. I threw away the spade and drew. Brodsky drew three.

I had finished in hearts—king, queen, ten, nine and eight. I laid them upon the table. Then I looked again and gasped. What I had thought to be the king was the knave. I had a straight flush.

"That's no symptom of ill luck," said the doctor, smiling. "Suppose you deal a hand."

This time I dealt myself two pairs. I threw the odd card away. Of course a full hand rewarded me. Brodsky had a single pair of threes.

"Well, that's the way," I said bitterly. "It's like the Van Wybergh matter. If we had had money on the game I shouldn't have drawn anything."

"That's true," said Brodsky, "but if you will recollect, you thought your straight flush was a simple flush; you mistook the knave for the king. In other words, you are not in a condition to seize your chance when it comes to you."

"What have I done to deserve this 'streak'?" I cried.

"My dear fellow," said the doctor, "there is no such thing as good luck or bad. Everything that happens, from the fall of a kingdom to the stubbing of one's toe, is the product of innumerable circumstances. Every event is the result of some action committed either in this or in some previous life; and so the world goes on, intricately interconnected, until the puzzle picture shall have been put together and the Karmic law fulfilled."

"The soul is the guardian in each of us that determines our destiny. In some, it is phenomenally alert to pick its path clear through the difficulties that beset its charge. In others it loses for the time this discriminating faculty—and then bad luck follows. Had your soul been alert, it would have warned you, by instinct, for example, not to invest in the stock market offices until Van Wybergh's messenger came. It would have told you to put the gold piece in some other pocket."

"But take courage. Every misfortune means that so much the less ill luck remains for you. Your luck will turn."

"It's too late," I answered moodily. "I would rather go through life suffering the normal calamities than have them heaped upon me like this. Isn't there any way to change this 'streak'?"

"Yes, there is a way," said Brodsky. "You can deceive your soul for awhile, for the soul is amenable to suggestion. For instance, good luck attends the flinging of an old shoe after a bridal pair. Why? Simply because this act, which is one that originally symbolized the infliction of intense humiliation, suggests misfortune to this watchful guardian, and automatically it endeavors to counteract it. So, too, in the legend of Job, and in the Grecian myth

of Polycrates and the ring, good luck brings about a reversal automatically. Humiliation and abjection gave back to Job more success than he had ever had before. Incidentally, have you not seen the gambler rise up from the card table and turn his chair round—an act which hypnotizes the soul into the belief that it must bring about some change in circumstances? But, though man can change his fortune, he can not permanently affect it. He can draw upon the bank of success, but he has to pay back all that he has taken."

"I don't care what happens afterward," I cried desperately. "Give me two years of happiness and worldly success; give me back my wife, my home, my money; then let fate do her worst to me. Can you do that?" I cried tauntingly.

"Yes, I can," replied the doctor. "But first think well what you are asking. Is your mind resolute?"

"It is."

THE doctor was looking at me oddly. His eyes seemed to burn through me, and I felt incapable of averting mine. "Strike that match you are holding," he said.

I had taken a match to relight my cigar; obediently I lit it and watched the flame creep down the wood.

"Come with me," said the doctor, rising. "You shall have what you have asked for."

I followed him along a narrow passage into his laboratory—a long, low, sound-proof room around which stood many electrical engines of an unknown character. He bade me step upon an insulated platform of what looked like glass, and applied a couple of electrodes to my neck and breast.

"Do not be alarmed," he said. "The experience will be a curious one, but neither painful nor troublesome. Before I fulfil your desire, however,

I will explain to you the mechanism of this machine.

"I spoke to you of the gambler turning round his chair. By means of this machine, however, I am enabled to turn the subject about, as in a mirror. It is purely a fourth-dimensional process, whereby the right and left sides become transposed; the right hand becomes the left hand, the heart beats on the right side of the body, the buttons of the coat appear on the right no longer, but on the left. Aside from these trifling inconveniences, nothing unusual will be noticed. It is a process unimaginable in the three-dimensional world, but in the four-dimensional as easily done as the turning of a coat inside out.

"This change affects the soul much as a pool is affected when stirred up with a stick. The elements of fortune are stirred up and set in motion, the heavier sink and the lighter, those that produce good fortune, remain on top. In this way you will achieve what you demand—at the price of draining the lees afterward." He pulled out a stout bar of some woodlike material, which I grasped firmly between my right finger and thumb.

"Do not on any account let go of this until I give the signal," said the doctor. He stepped down from my side and touched a lever. There was a crackle, succeeded by a humming sound, and a continuous line of pale blue sparks was whirled along the thin wires that connected the machine with the electrodes, so that it seemed to become blue-hot. Brodsky hovered over the instrument with outstretched hands, constantly adjusting it, as though to incubate the vital forces which were at play.

"It is purely a matter of physics," he continued. "The soul, which is composed of the same atoms as the earthly body, of which it is a counterpart, but inconceivably more ten-

nous, becomes plastic at a little more than seven million vibrations a second." He indicated a little dial that I had not noticed before, on which the hundred thousands were marked as units, and the millions indicated as tens. The hand was hovering over the four.

"You are now experiencing a voltage, one thousandth part of which would instantly prove fatal," remarked the doctor. The hand crept up to the five, and, with a final spurt, the buzzing and blue light ceased.

"Do you suppose that the machine is really silent and cold, because you can neither see it nor hear it move?" asked Brodsky.

"Of course not," I replied. "Science tells us that the vibrations are too high for sense perception."

"Just so," the doctor answered. "Comparatively low vibrations strike upon our ears as sound; at a higher speed the sound ceases and we see them as red light. Still higher, and the light becomes in succession yellow, green, indigo, and violet blue. Quickened the vibrations beyond the ultra-violet rays, and we get the X-rays, electricity, radio-activity, all different aspects of the same phenomenon of motion. At last there comes a speed at which we can no longer register these phenomena through the medium of even the most delicate instrument. But when we reach the seven million point we stir the world of the soul; the invisible becomes once more visible."

He ceased. I felt a strange little thrill, as though someone had poured cold water down my back.

"Step down," said the doctor, reversing the lever.

I obeyed him and stood still in the middle of the laboratory. Was that all? Something had happened to me. I looked down at my feet, my legs, my waistcoat. The buttons had shifted to the opposite side, as Brodsky had foretold. I placed my hand

to the right side of my chest. My heart was pulsing normally, but undeniably on the wrong side.

"Yes," said the doctor, smiling, "if ever you are starving again, you can obtain employment as a medical freak in a museum, or at some hospital. Ah! Don't let go of that bar. Yes, it is in your left hand now."

I was left-handed, too. For a moment a sickening terror rushed over me. I pushed my left hand against the wall to steady myself. Then I put it to my breast pocket to find my handkerchief. It was not there—it must be on the other side, of course. I found it and placed it to my forehead. Something dropped from it and fell tinkling upon the ground. I stooped and picked it up; it was the five-dollar piece I had lost.

"And now," said the doctor, "in order that your good fortune, which, you see, is already beginning, may fulfil itself in the most adequate manner, you had best go back to the pier on which I found you earlier in the evening, and take up the thread of your adventures there. Make the most of your success, for it will be short-lived."

I HAVE some recollection of stumbling through the streets again, of descending the long wharf, still empty and deserted, under a sky brightening as the sun mounted toward the horizon. Then a temporary unconsciousness overcame me, for when I opened my eyes it was early daylight and the dock laborers were trooping to their work, marching stolidly past me without speaking. I looked around. I was lying three feet from the water's edge, and the chill wind cut me like a knife. "Only a drunken laborer sleeping off his debauch," they must have thought. But I had not tasted liquor for days. Was it a dream, then? My hand still clutched the gold piece. With this, at least, I could obtain food and shel-

ter for a while. I made my way to the wretched tenement in which I had found shelter for the few days before, determined to purchase a week's respite from the cold at least. I pushed open the rickety hall door and ascended to my miserable room. Inside I heard somebody sobbing. I turned the handle slowly, not daring to believe the thought that came to me. My wife was seated on the one chair that stood at the foot of the stretcher bed. She turned her head and saw me and, with a great cry of gladness, ran to me and flung her arms around me.

"I have come back," she sobbed. "I could not remain away from you and leave you to struggle alone. We will face poverty together, you and I. I will never leave you again—never. Why," she went on looking at me strangely, "you have new clothes."

Then for the first time I noticed that I was still wearing the suit that Brodsky had loaned me. My heart leaped in my breast. With the rags gone, my self-respect had returned; now I felt able once again to face the world. I would go out and look for work immediately; be it of any sort. I would undertake it. Nothing should keep me down.

I bought a morning newspaper in order to look through the advertisements. A large, black headline on the outside page arrested my attention, however. There had been a sharp rise in stocks; two rival financiers were fighting for the control of the Seaboard Eagle line and shares had doubled overnight. I flung the paper from me with a groan. I had held a hundred shares of this stock until their steady rise induced me to sell out and purchase a thousand on margin, in the hope of reaping a rich pecuniary harvest. Then the crash came, and they had sunk with amazing swiftness. Only three days before I had telephoned my broker to

sell out and send the wretched remnant to my wife, that she might have a little to live upon for a few weeks at least. And if I had not sent it I should have made a fortune.

The broker was an old acquaintance; he had been the cause of my ruin; perhaps he would give me work—any work, at ten dollars a week, something that would at least provide us with the bare necessities of life. Resolved to plead my cause desperately, I hurried to his office, where I found him just taking off his coat. He hastened forward with hands outstretched.

“Congratulations, my dear fellow,” he cried heartily. “You have made thirty-seven thousand odd on this deal. I have been expecting your instructions to sell. The boom won’t last—perhaps not over to-night. Shall I sell for you at once? Be satisfied with what you’ve made!”

He had never received my telephone message! His clerk must have received it and, in some incomprehensible lapse of memory, forgotten it. The next day Seaboard Eagle stocks fell back to what they had previously been, but not before I had sold out for nearly forty thousand dollars.

On the next day I went back to my offices in Pitt Street and re-engaged them, paying a year’s rent in advance. Though I had been compelled to dispose of all my instruments and library, by some fortunate chance they still remained there; the dealer had sold them to the landlord, who had contemplated transferring them to his son, a young student. In a few minutes I had again become their possessor.

“Patients will not matter to me now,” I mused aloud. “I shall have leisure to devote myself to medical investigation——”

A knock at the door recalled me

to myself. I opened it; there upon the threshold stood Van Wybergh himself. He sprang forward and grasped my hands.

“Thank God I have found you, Doctor!” he exclaimed. “I have heard of the reputation you made for yourself at the hospital; you performed the identical operation successfully, they tell me, and I would not trust any surgeon but you. Come quickly.”

Within two years I had gained a reputation second to no surgeon in the East. I attended the President; my fame spread to Europe, and I received the largest fee upon record for curing the infant Prince of Portugal of some childish complaint, being escorted to Lisbon upon the royal yacht with naval honors. My home life was ideally happy. Two children were born to us. With money, fame, and, best of all, work, nothing was lacking to make my fortune complete. I had forgotten the misty dream of that night upon the wharf; if I recalled it, I dismissed it as the fantasy of a starving man. And yet, somehow, somewhere, I felt the existence of some troublous thing that I put from my mind, some dark secret which hardly entered my field of consciousness.

FOR several weeks I had been feeling curiously indisposed. They say that the physician who diagnoses his own ailments has a fool for a patient. I went to Sargent of Buffalo. He sounded me; then he took me by the coat lapels and I saw the joy of the doctor over some rare complaint burn in his eyes, for all his solemnity.

“My dear doctor,” he said, “your working days are over. Has your heart never troubled you before?”

“My heart!” I exclaimed.

“You have a congenital malposition of the heart,” he answered.

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The Man Who Lost His Luck

(Continued from page 620)

"Did you not know that it was on the right side of your body? It is one of the rarest things in pathology, isn't it? I have seen two cases in thirty years of practise and neither survived to adolescence. Surely you knew!"

Yes, I had known. This was the secret that I had put out of thought and mind.

"How long do you give me?" I asked.

"Four weeks," he answered.

The blow had fallen. I was to taste the lees at last. For days I wrestled with my despair. And at last I thought of Brodsky. I went to his house. He waited for me, as it seemed to me; he greeted me with a chilling smile.

"Give me back my ill luck!" I cried desperately. "What does all my success avail me now that I have to die?"

"You are asking the impossible," the doctor answered.

"But it is you who changed the current of my life," I pleaded wildly. "Surely you can undo this thing! Give me poverty," I raved. "Take away everything that I possess—money and reputation; let me be the meanest wretch that crawls along the waterfront, but let me live."

"You are asking the impossible," said Brodsky again. "You have received all that life had to offer you; you have drawn to the last penny upon the bank of fortune, and you must reap as you have sown. There is no refuge."

I hung my head in shame. "Would to God that I had been content with what was given me!" I muttered in anguish.

"Besides," Brodsky went on, "I

warned you not to let go that bar and in a few moments it will burn your fingers. Drop it!" He snapped his fingers sharply in my face. And suddenly a cloud seemed to roll away from before my gaze. I stared around me; around the office, down at my clothes, up into the smiling face of the doctor. The bar had grown thin and weighed no more than a feather. It fell from between my fingers; it was the match which I had struck to light my cigar, and the flames were spreading toward the end. I had lived through two years of life in a period of ten or twelve seconds. I saw the doctor watching my face curiously.

"Well," he said, "do you still want to draw upon the bank of fortune?"

"It was a dream?" I cried. "Was none of it real?—the electrical machine, the luck, the fame I achieved—was none of it real?"

"Happily not," said Brodsky smiling. "It was hardly a dream; it was a little experiment in hypnotics, during the course of which I projected into your mind a few random ideas that came into my own. See," he added, to dispel the remnants of my vision, "your coat buttons are still on the right side, and if you put your hand beneath them you will not feel your heart pulsating.

"I could, perhaps, have brought to bear psychical powers to bring you that luck from which you begged to be released, but there is a simpler way. I want a secretary to help me with my work. Will you accept the post? It will afford you ample time to resume your medical practise, and, if you will be my guest until you get upon your feet again, I am sure that your financial and domestic difficulties will soon have become things of the past."

NOTE.—The next story in this series, "The Dream That Came True," will be printed in WEIRD TALES next month.