

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME VIII

NUMBER 5

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: G. M. Jeffries Agency, Hopefield House, Hanwell, London, W. 7. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' main office at 450 East Ohio Street, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The TENTH COMMANDMENT

BY
VICTOR ROUSSEAU



"The heavy report of the discharge
echoed through the half-empty
house."

THE one condition of Dr. Ivan Brodsky's psychical work that he found most burdensome was the constant requests that poured in upon him from innumerable people who had come to hear of him. On all sides he was beset by applications for assistance and advice in the solution of some problem which, while immensely increasing his reputation, left him little time for the prosecution of his investigations. He was forced to refuse many of these applicants, who, in return, denounced him as a charlatan. Brodsky received denunciation and praise with equal indifference.

By this time he had severed his connection with the hospital and devoted his time entirely to private practise among patients suffering from rare mental and nervous disorders. As an attached physician, he felt that the ethics of the profession

excluded the use of non-recognized remedies. In private practise he felt free to make use of his knowledge of those spiritual causes which, he claimed, underlay all physical manifestations of disease.

One morning I found him in earnest conversation with a visitor, a young man of agitated aspect who, on seeing me enter, rose from his chair precipitately and prepared to take his departure.

"Don't go," said Dr. Brodsky; "allow me to introduce you to my secretary, who is my confidential assistant in these matters."

The young man, who was introduced to me as Mr. John Sykes, sat down again. His agitation was still more manifest; he stared around him as one bewildered.

"Now, Mr. Sykes, suppose you repeat your story," said Dr. Brodsky. "Begin at the beginning and don't leave out anything, even if it seems to you to be of trivial moment."

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

"Well, sir," said the young man impetuously, "as I said to you at first, I am greatly in doubt whether this is a case for you or for a jury. But I wish to exhaust every possible remedy before taking the law into my own hands. Then, if I become convinced beyond all possibility of doubt that my wife is untrue to me, I shall put a bullet through my brother's head, and another afterward through my own."

"Which wouldn't help either of you in the least," replied Brodsky suavely. "You would find yourselves immediately transplanted into another not so very different world, with your enmity still at boiling point, but without the physical means of allaying it. Suppose you continue."

"My name, as I have said, is John Sykes," said the young man more calmly. "My brother Philip and I were the only children of our father and the inheritors of the Sykes estate. My father cut me out of his will on account of my marriage. My wife is a woman whom no man could feel ashamed of; my offense was that of having married without asking his consent. He was subject to fits of temper and changed his will. Had he lived he would undoubtedly have forgiven me. But unfortunately he died almost immediately afterward, leaving the Sykes mansion and grounds to Philip, while I was forced to continue the owner of a little cottage adjacent which I bought some years ago. Naturally, this caused an estrangement between my brother and me. I, myself, am happy enough in my cottage, and, until a few days ago, when I first doubted my wife's affection, no happier mortal existed. My wife, however, had always felt a sentimental regard for the old mansion. It would naturally have passed to us, Philip receiving an equivalent

in cash. The disappointment has greatly affected her.

"Some weeks ago, my brother and I having then been estranged for several months, I surprised my wife one afternoon coming out of the mansion, where he was and still is living. You can imagine my consternation. My brother had already everything that I lacked save only her; was I to be bereft of her through any machinations of his to draw her within the sphere of his interests? I taxed her with visiting him; she admitted it and, weeping, explained that she had gone only to intercede for me. She wanted us to be friends, and, above everything else, she wanted Philip to sell us the mansion upon favorable terms, as he purposed traveling abroad and was not bound to it by any such intense attachment such as she had conceived. Philip had almost yielded to her request. I, however, am not of a temperament easily placated. I suspected that my brother was partly instrumental in the changing of our father's will. I refused to have any kind of dealings with him. I scolded her for visiting him, explained the misconception that might be put upon such an act by village gossip, and she promised me never to see him again.

"A few weeks ago I learned from servants' chatter that the Sykes mansion was reputed to be haunted by the spirit of a woman. The butler had told a village crony that the figure of a woman walked through the rooms and passages at night. He had seen it, had taken it for a sleep-walker and essayed to catch it, but it had vanished before his eyes and his hands had grasped only thin air.

"I am something of a student and often sit up alone all night with my books and papers. I am at present engaged in writing a monograph upon our American bats. Sometimes my observations take me away for a

day or two, so that my wife and I see not too much of one another. Indeed, of late, since the episode I referred to, we seem to have begun to drift apart. I am not a believer in the supernatural, and this foolish gossip of the butler aroused the most terrible suspicions in me. I resolved to discover for myself what truth lay in the rumor.

"Pretending to be about to set off on a two-day journey for the purpose of obtaining specimens, I came back at night and concealed myself in an old building, now unoccupied, but formerly used as a barn by my grandfather, adjoining the mansion. From here I was enabled to obtain a clear view of a large part of the interior, which is built in a rambling way and can in this manner be overlooked. I saw my brother lower the light in his study, and a minute or two later saw the lamp flash out in his bedroom. The lower portion of the house was plunged into darkness.

"It was past midnight. I was about to dismiss my project as a chimera, feeling much ashamed of my suspicions, when an irresistible impulse impelled me to go to the open window of the darkened study. Actuated by the same instinct which seemed to force me onward against my will, I crept in noiselessly, traversed the room, and emerged into the corridor. From the far end a veiled figure came gliding toward me. For a moment the eeriness of the situation, I confess, rooted me to the spot with horror. It came nearer; and suddenly I found myself looking into what I can swear was the face of my wife. Another moment, and the figure had passed me, with the same noiseless tread, and vanished into the distance.

"I do not know how long I remained there. When I came to my senses I was in my cottage, fumbling with a pistol. I dashed up to my wife's room and hammered violently upon the door. Suddenly she came

out and confronted me. She was robed in a dressing gown and looked up with innocent, frightened eyes, as though just awakened out of sleep. I made no answer to her terrified appeals, but rushed out of the house and came straight to you, knowing that if there could be any supernatural solution of the difficulty you would put me out of my suspense. While the period between our encounter in the mansion and that in my own cottage seems almost too short to have enabled her to return and assume the rôle she played, I confess that I look upon you as the last possible refuge left me before I commit some act of desperation."

IT WAS impossible not to be deeply impressed by the evident sincerity of the young man and by his deep distress. For my part, I was inclined to believe the worst. But a glance into Brodsky's impassive face convinced me that he did not share my suspicions. Brodsky's opinions of women were curiously fine; as I learned afterward, and hope subsequently to be able to tell, his life had been molded by one of the noblest characters, who had died before the day set for their marriage, leaving him to cherish her memory as a continual inspiration.

We determined to start at once for the village, which was some fifteen miles distant, situated in the heart of a sparsely settled farming country. It was decided, both in view of the young man's excited condition and in order to enable us to pursue our investigations freely, which conscience would not have permitted had we been the guests of Mrs. Sykes, that we should make our headquarters at the village inn, where Sykes was expecting to meet a man who might throw light upon the problem. We arrived there late in the afternoon and found the place empty of visitors, it being late in the fall. As we were seated in the spacious old-fashioned parlor,

an elderly man of consequential demeanor came softly and furtively up the back path. Sykes rose to meet him.

"Gentlemen, this is Jones, my brother's butler and an old employee of my father's," he said, rising dramatically and locking the door. "Now Jones, repeat what you told me yesterday."

"I've more to tell you since I saw you yesterday, Mr. John," said Jones huskily. He adopted toward the young man that mixture of patronage and servility which indicates, in a menial, the acceptance of some bribe in return for a dereliction of duty. "We saw her last night, sir. I thought I heard a burglar downstairs and dressed myself and went out to see. On the landing I met the master coming out of his room. He had heard the noise too. We went down softlike, and suddenly we saw her, as plain as life, coming along the passage."

"Who was she?" interrupted Sykes in a voice choking with emotion.

"That I wouldn't take it upon myself to say, sir," said the butler with a smirk. "'Twasn't anybody I know, leastways, so far as I could tell by the walk, because she wore a veil and was all in white, which is a powerful disguiser for females, sir. So I says to myself: 'Jones, if the master chooses to have young female ghosts in his house at 2 in the morning, that ain't no business of yours.' So I turns to go back, and, while I was looking at her, she disappeared, right under my eyes."

Suddenly Sykes flew at the man like a deerhound and grasped him by the collar, shaking him furiously.

"You rascal, tell me who the woman was," he cried.

The butler's face turned purple.

"'Twasn't anybody I know, sir," he gasped, breaking loose and reeling back against the wall. "I'll swear it wasn't any human living being, sir.

She vanished right before my very eyes——"

Sykes stood off and looked at the man contemptuously.

"Jones," he said, "you are a dirty, lying hound. You told your cronies here that it was Mrs. Sykes."

The man began to tremble.

"You know me from old times, Jones," continued the young man more coldly. "You shall have one chance to prove your statement, and if you can't I'll shoot you like a dog."

"I swear"—the man began to babble—"I swear I told nobody. But it was her, Mr. John, and I can't lie to you. I'm willing to prove it and to stake my life on it."

"Jones," said the young man, "these gentlemen are friends of mine. At 10 o'clock tonight, or as soon afterward as the light goes out in your master's study, we shall be at the side door. You will unlock it and admit us to the empty picture gallery which commands a full view of the corridors. Here!" He took a roll of bills from his pocket and peeled off half a dozen. "Take this for your services. And if ever you say a word in the village——"

"Yes sir—yes, Mr. John," babbled the man, pouching the money with avidity. "I'll be there on time, sir." He turned and crept out of the room. Once outside, however, he gradually reassumed his jaunty demeanor.

When he was gone, John Sykes began to pace the floor with long strides. Brodsky and I watched him in silence. Presently he wheeled and came up to us.

"You see my wife's name has become a byword of village gossip," he exclaimed angrily. "Evidently in her infatuation she has lost all sense of fear. As likely as not she is even now planning a return trip to the mansion. I have no criticism to make of her," he went on brokenly. "It is my brother who has first robbed me of

my inheritance and then of the only woman I have loved. May they be accursed——”

“Stop!” said Brodsky, laying his hand restrainingly upon the young man’s shoulder. “It will be time to accuse her when you know. At present you know nothing.”

John Sykes looked at him incredulously.

“Do you mean—that there can be any hope?” he whispered hoarsely. “Do you think she is innocent?”

“I believe in all women as long as I can,” said Brodsky simply.

Nevertheless, looking into his face, I read the struggle which he was undergoing against the weight of the evidence. And suddenly the young man collapsed into a chair and buried his face in his hands. He pulled a locket from his breast, opened it, and pressed his lips to the inside. Then he held it up to us.

“Look at it,” he whispered. “Look at her face and say what you can read there.”

It was the miniature of a young woman. She was strikingly beautiful, even in this land of beautiful women; but what held and fascinated the observer was the quality of innocence and purity that seemed to shine through the external features, as a light in a lamp. The artist had done his work surpassingly well. I stole a glance at Brodsky; his brow had cleared.

“I believe in her,” he said again. “And I think before the night has gone your fears and doubts will have been dispelled. Courage, friend. And now let us have supper, for the physical condition has a powerful reaction upon the spirits.”

IT WAS a mournful supper in the deserted inn. Brodsky was at his best. He kept us amused with countless anecdotes of his own life. I had never known how much he had undergone, what he had seen, now tramping

through Europe as a penniless student, now taking a leading part in the battle for Polish freedom; anon, imprisoned in the underground dungeon at St. Peter and St. Paul, escaping in a workman’s clothes and working his way to America as a sailor under the noses of the Russian Marine officers. But, though once or twice our companion’s face lit up and he smiled faintly, it was evident that he was almost overwhelmed by the tragedy that had come into his life.

No further reference was made to the engagement of the evening, but we sat there, smoking and talking, and listening to Brodsky, until ten strokes rang out from the old-fashioned clock in the corner. Then, with a deep sigh, the young man rose and led the way out into the darkness of the fall evening. At the end of the street the large bulk of the mansion appeared, cutting off the view beyond with its great mansard roof and out-buildings, of which the Sykes cottage seemed to form a part. Even as we looked, a light went out suddenly in a lower window, to reappear shortly afterward immediately overhead. The master of the mansion had retired to his room.

As we passed silently down the deserted street I caught the faint reflection from the light above the door of the inn as it struck upon some rounded, metallic thing which the young man was fingering. It was a pistol. On the way I contrived to snatch a fleeting word with Brodsky.

“Doctor,” I said, “you are abetting a murder.”

“No,” he answered me, “I am saving a woman’s name and her husband’s happiness.”

We halted at a side door and waited. After quite an interval the butler came out and admitted us. He led the way on tiptoe, we following with infinite precautions, along a corridor, up some carpeted stairs, and out upon the dimly lit circle of an

old picture gallery, where generations of the Sykes family looked gravely down from their heavily gilded frames. The sight aroused the young man to a frenzy of passion. This was the inheritance of which he had been defrauded! I saw him shake as with an ague, saw his fingers tighten convulsively upon the handle of his pistol; then I saw Brodsky's restraining arm encircle his shoulders and steady him. The little drama was enacted in perfect silence. We crouched down at the edge of the platform, below which we could see the passages of the rambling old structure radiating away on the three sides as spokes of a wheel. And we waited, shivering, there, none speaking, only gluing our eyes upon the distant end of the corridor which led toward the wing of the mansion which Philip Sykes occupied. The butler had slipped away, but John had forgotten him.

Eleven o'clock boomed out from a deep-sounding clock; the air grew chilly. I shivered. I looked at Brodsky. He was watching every movement of his patient, his hand, alert and sinuous, seemingly ready to leap forth to restrain him from any deed of rashness. But John was oblivious to both of us also; he fingered his pistol and knelt there watching, watching——

Crouching there, we three seemed to have become actors in some horrible drama that was being enacted for the benefit of those rows of silent ghosts, those family ancestors of dead and gone Sykes, looking out, starched and bewigged, from their gold frames, which were so faintly illuminated by the dull light of the low gas jets that the painted figures seemed to stand out as in a stereoscope, to have the verisimilitude of living men. I must have become half-hypnotized by the suspense of watching. My mind slipped away from the work that was at hand; I was living over my life in

other places, thinking of the past, of the ambitions and aspirations with which I had started out on my career, of my strange meeting with Brodsky, of a thousand things——

SUDDENLY I felt Brodsky's fingers tighten upon my sleeve. I glanced along the distant corridor. My heart bounded in my breast and seemed to stand still. For there, emerging from out of the gloom, clothed in a misty garment, her head covered with a filmy veil, was a woman that glided toward us as no human, waking being moves, the eyes fixed and trancelike. For all the dimness and distance I knew her. It was the woman of the miniature. Brodsky recognized her, too, and the young man.

I saw his figure stiffen; every muscle in his body became as taut as steel. He crouched there, watching her, upon his face an aspect of horror and hatred terrible to witness. The figure approached us; now it was directly under us and had not seemed to notice us. Suddenly his hand shot out; I saw the gleam of the pistol. Then, still more quickly, I saw Brodsky's arm dart forward, and an instant later the heavy report of the discharge went echoing through the half-empty house, arousing a thousand echoes among the rafters.

I was upon my feet and Brodsky was pulling at my sleeve. "Follow me," he cried. "To the cottage!"

He dragged me after him, and the young man followed us. I moved as though in a dream, under Brodsky's compulsion; but, though we ran like the wind, John Sykes easily outstripped us. I knew what passion winged his speed. Overhead we heard noises and movement. Shouts were borne after us.

"This way," cried the doctor, as I halted, confused, in the middle of the winding galleries. He pulled me toward the door. Another moment

and we were outside, pressing the yielding turf beneath our feet. We ran around the house and darted toward the cottage, John Sykes ahead of us, the pistol still clenched in his hand. From the right we heard the sound of a man running. At the very door of the cottage Philip Sykes broke out upon us; and, as Philip drew back in amazement, John leaped at him, bearing him down upon the threshold, striving to free his right arm to gain pistol vantage. Philip perceived the peril and fought desperately for life; John's hand was upon his throat, his brother's grasp relaxed; another instant all would have been over. But even at the moment of his triumph he stopped and staggered backward. For the door had opened, and there, confronting us, fully attired, a lantern in her hand, her eyes wide with suspense and terror, was the lady of the miniature. And the three waited motionless as figures carved out of stone, till Brodsky stepped up and broke the silence. He took the pistol from John Sykes' unresisting hand.

"Let us go in and talk over the matter," he said.

IF TEARS are akin to laughter, tragedy is surely akin to comedy. For hours, as it seems to me now, the four of them sat in the little cottage parlor, laughing incoherently, listening at first incredulously to the account that Brodsky unfolded. For the merest chance words let drop by John Sykes during their first interview had set him upon the track of his daring hypothesis, which he had courageously verified, even at the risk of murder. Afterward they began to believe, though I am not sure that Philip Sykes believes it yet; as for John, his joy at the restoration of his confidence in the lady drowned all baser emotions of rage or resentment. For, whatever other explanation there might have been, he knew that his

wife could not possibly have been inside his brother's house in person, when she had met him at his own door.

"I was not sure until the end that my hypothesis was correct," said Brodsky. "But it was your statement of the sentimental regard which Mrs. Sykes felt for the old mansion, and her deep disappointment at the loss of it, that put me upon the track. Do you recollect the tenth commandment, which begins: 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house?' Many people have wondered at the inclusion of so comparatively—as it seems—venial a sin among those of theft and murder.

"Yet, like most things, that commandment exists with very good reason, for undoubtedly the Great Lawgiver was acquainted with the physical results of spiritual things. There was a ghost in the mansion." He turned to Mrs. Sykes. "Have you not dreamed of it continually?" he asked.

"Often and often," she answered.

"You were the ghost," said Brodsky. "It was you, who by the strength of your longing, were nightly transplanted there. You were there in spirit, but not in body, when we watched in the gallery. And had that pistol bullet pierced your ghostly form it would have killed you none the less surely, so intimately associated are the body and that psychical envelope which men miscall the soul, which is the body of desires and emotions. And unless you can overcome this longing, I confess I fear that you will continue to haunt the mansion."

"I shall haunt it no more," replied Mrs. Sykes, laughing. "My brother-in-law was willing long ago to dispose of it to my husband."

"Indeed, I have been most anxious to do so," said Philip. "But my brother, who has inherited the Sykes temper, refused all overtures for

reconciliation until your happy intervention this evening. But now I shall insist upon his taking the place off my hands upon any terms he will accept, for I confess I am a practical sort of man and don't want to be

troubled by ghosts, even when they are the personal property of a very charming and newly-discovered sister-in-law."

Note.—The next story in this series, *The Legacy of Hate*, will be printed next month.
