

Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office 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' Chicago office at 450 East Ohio Street, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. Copyright, 1927, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

Contents for July, 1927

Cover Design	C. C. Senf	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Return of the Master"</i>		
The Return of the Master	H. Warner Munn	6
<i>The Werewolf of Ponkert returns from the pit of Hell to thwart the sinister Master who has wrought his downfall</i>		
Gray Ghouls	Bassett Morgan	21
<i>A creepy weird tale of the South Seas, giant apes and ery murders—a startling story of surgery</i>		
The Impossible	Don Robert Catlin	35
<i>Travis sought out the source of the tricks of Black Magic, and was trailed across the world by a malignant Chinaman</i>		
The Unchained Devil	Roscoe Gilmore Stott	42
<i>The violinist made an evil pledge to a statue, and was redeemed from utter ruin by the love of a girl</i>		

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

- The Curse of Everard Maundy**-----**Seabury Quinn** 49
An eldritch tale of voodoo, reanimated corpses, and the intrepid little French ghost-breaker, Jules de Grandin
- Tangled Skeins** -----**Mary McEnnery Erhard** 69
An utterly strange adventure was that of the Rev. Wilfred Cumberland—a story of transposed personality
- A Fable** -----**Clark Ashton Smith** 76
Verse
- The Ultimate Problem**-----**Victor Rousseau** 77
The last of a series of stories, each complete in itself, dealing with Dr. Ivan Brodsky, "The Surgeon of Souls"
- The El Dorado of Death**-----**Percy B. Prior** 84
A ghost-story of the gold-diggings of Australia—the tragic adventure of two brothers
- As Always** -----**A. Leslie** 86
Verse
- The Mystery of Sylmare** -----**Hugh Irish** 87
Strange suicides shocked the artist-colony at Sylmare—the story of a conspiracy of plant-life against humanity
- The Edge of the Shadow**-----**R. Ernest Dupuy** 102
A tale of the terror that hides in the night—a story of an evil entity, and the howling of dogs in the darkness
- The Old Crow of Cairo**-----**T. Lovell Beddoes** 105
Verse
- The Algerian Cave**-----**Dick Heine** 106
Reincarnation played strange pranks in the lives of Paul Mitrande and Louis Fanon
- The Dark Chrysalis (Part 2)**-----**Eli Colter** 113
The epic of the microbe-hunters—a three-part serial novel dealing with the terrible scourge of cancer
- Weird Story Reprint**
The Dragon Fang -----**Fitz-James O'Brien** 125
A bizarre and fantastic tale of China under the emperors—a story of strange magic, and love, and a phantom duck
- The Eyrie** ----- 138
A chat with the readers

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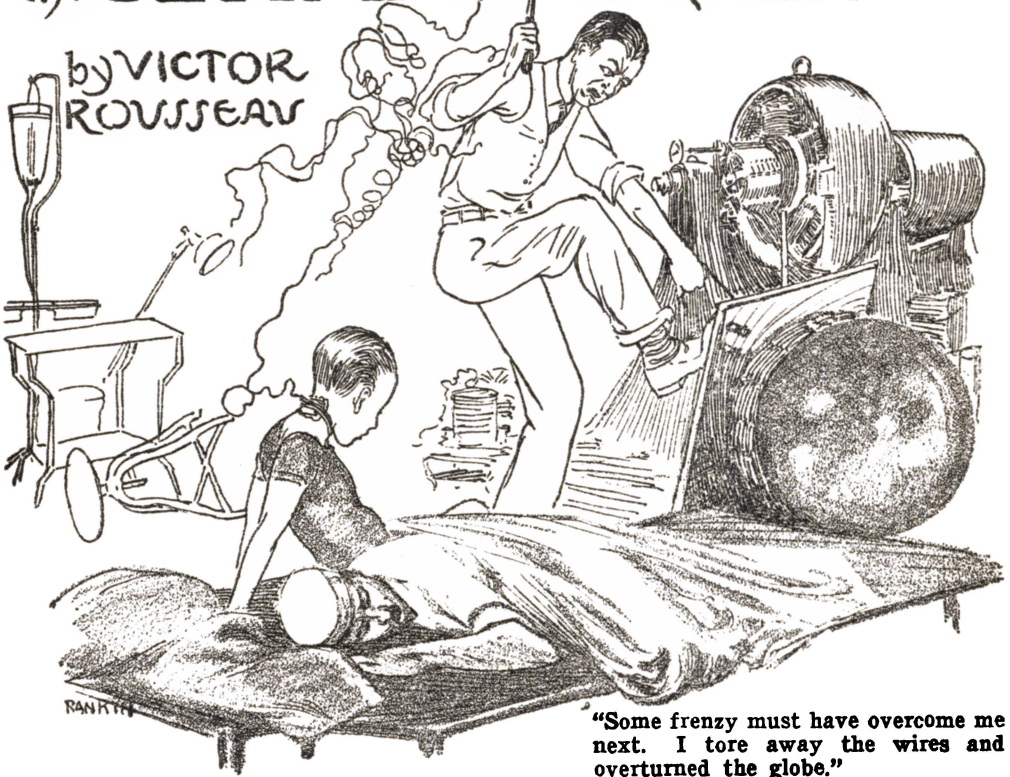
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The ULTIMATE PROBLEM

by VICTOR
ROUSSEAU



"Some frenzy must have overcome me next. I tore away the wires and overturned the globe."

DURING the two years that I had acted as secretary to Dr. Brodsky, assisting him in his psychical experiments, I had been enabled to build up an active medical practise of my own. My duties were light; often the doctor did not call upon my services for two or three weeks together. More and more rarely had he done so of recent months, and gradually the conviction, sure, although intuitive, was borne in upon me that the days of our association were numbered.

Although comparatively young in years, Brodsky lived through the existences of three ordinary men.

NOTE—This is the eleventh and last of a series of stories, each complete in itself, dealing with Dr. Ivan Brodsky. "The Surgeon of Souls." The series began in WEIRD TALES for September, 1926.

His early revolutionary career in Poland, his struggles in America, at first for the mere necessities of life, afterward for success; finally, the dedication of his career to the solution of psychical problems had satiated him with worldly experiences. He was unmarried; his only ties lay, as he had told me, upon the veiled shore of eternity. I felt that life held nothing further for him.

"Death," he said to me once, "is no result of physical processes. So wonderful a machine is the human body that there exists no reason at all why it should not go on forever. What kills is the satiation with earthly experiences that comes to us; it is the longing of the soul for its resting place, where it stores up and absorbs

all the results of its earthly achievements until it is ready to renew them in some fresh incarnation."

"And you—are you satisfied?" I ventured to ask.

"Not with the world," he answered. "But with my own personality—yes, I am tired of Ivan Brodsky. These incarnations are the merest halting places in the soul's long pilgrimage. I would like to take up my work afresh, but in a different body, so that I might forget Brodsky, with his hopes and longings and disappointments, and face the world with the fresh anticipations and new faith of a child."

"But that is annihilation!" I cried. "All the dreams of immortality that are the hope of the world, the desire for continued personal existence after death—are these all useless?"

"By no means," the doctor answered. "The personality persists after the change called death. It remains so long as it is needed. Reincarnation is not fulfilled until the soul has grown tired of its remembrances and voluntarily descends, after some thousand years of dreams, to gain new experiences. And then, though it puts off the old personality forever, the results of its acts remain to modify its new life; shadowy remembrances flit through the brain; old friends are encountered; besides, in the end, everything is remembered.

"For those who wish continued personality there is a heaven of rest where every dream and hope come true. But as for myself, I confess, if only I could start life again and take up my work in a new body I should be infinitely content. Nor will this be long, I believe."

I knew that he alluded to his heart, which was somewhat affected; yet the danger was not imminent nor likely to become so for many years to come.

"At any rate, I shall be ready to

answer the call, when it comes," said the doctor. He walked over to his desk and unlocked a drawer. "Here is a sealed letter that I have left you," he said. "After my death you will open it."

I wondered even then why he did not lock the drawer.

I remembered this conversation the more vividly in the light of subsequent events. It must have been a little more than a week later when he sent for me.

"I am resolved to undertake an experiment," he said, "more difficult than any that I have ever attempted. It has been done before; yet it is arduous and uncertain. You have heard of the Indian fakirs who actually pass over the borderland of death, allowing themselves to be buried in a grave, on which the grass sprouts, only to be revived after a period of months?"

"You will not attempt such an experiment as that?" I cried.

"No," answered the doctor. "It would be senseless to attempt so foolish an experiment without grave reason. Nevertheless, I am planning one somewhat analogous; I intend to pass through the gates of death for the sake of giving back to one who has been deprived of it his inheritance of the soul."

"You mean the imbecile!" I cried, suddenly understanding.

"Yes," answered the doctor. "I hope that this will succeed; but if my own death be the result, at least the last act of my life will have been to some good purpose." And I could not dissuade him from his intention.

AMONG the dozen or more inmates of Dr. Brodsky's home, whom he maintained out of his own pocket, was an imbecile orphan, some seven years of age. This child had never exhibited the slightest sign of intelligence; he lived a purely vegetative existence, had never learned to crawl,

to utter a word. He did not even possess the common animal faculty of recognizing one person from another. As there existed no apparent cause for this defect, no deformity of the head or body, and the vital functions seemed in perfect condition, many theories had been advanced as to the cause of so singular an anomaly. Dr. Brodsky, after studying the child for many months, had finally formulated his own conclusions.

"It is one of those rare cases," he said, "in which the soul was not born into the body. It remains shut out, as you can imagine yourself shut out of your house. Doubtless it is hovering in close proximity to the mortal form, connected, as it must be, by the ethereal ligatures that bind it to the spinal cord. In this condition, it is virtually deprived of its existence upon either of the planes; it is earth-bound and spirit-bound. And there is only one remedy; some other disembodied soul must assist it. It is my plan to pass out of the body temporarily and to compel it to incarcerate itself."

"And if you can not return?" I cried.

"I shall ask your assistance in this matter," the doctor answered. "I shall give you careful instructions, which you will fulfil to the letter. If, after the lapse of a certain time, you find that these attempts are fruitless, you will break open the letter which I have left for you in the bureau drawer, and read it."

I can hardly tell how this project affected me. In vain I pointed out to the doctor the inexpediency, from a purely utilitarian point of view, of risking his own life for the sake of giving intelligence to the imbecile. But my words were unheeded. I felt that in truth this was to be our last experiment, that it amounted almost to premeditated suicide. I refused to participate in it.

Well, in the end, of course, I consented, though I felt that this would be the last occasion upon which I should look into the doctor's face while he was alive. Looking back now, I think my mind must have been warped; I accuse myself a hundred times of having been the cause of Brodsky's death. Yet the first lesson that he had implanted in my mind, ever since I first heard him lecture to us students at the hospital, was the duty of obedience. He had commanded and it was for me to obey. Especially, however, I base my vindication upon that hypnotic power through the medium of which Brodsky possessed the ability to compel me, or anyone else, to obey him.

Some days elapsed before the experiment was made. Brodsky occupied himself during this interval, as I surmised, in setting his affairs in order. At last, upon the afternoon appointed, I repaired with him to his laboratory, a long chamber in the rear of the house, completely shut off from all communication with the outside. Ordinarily there was no sound within, but now a great electrical engine buzzed and throbbed beside a low, flat table, raised only some six inches above the floor, and surmounted by a large bowl of translucent blue, into which the wires entered. Upon the table the imbecile child sat, propped up against a flexible pillow of rubber, or some similar non-conducting material, searching the room with his large lack-luster eyes. The doctor stooped over his machine and made his adjustments; then he connected a rubber sponge, at the termination of a network of wires, with the child's spine, and bound it there with strips of cloth in such a manner that it could not be removed. He drew another wire, terminating in a similar sponge, from the recesses of the machine, and affixed it to himself in the same way; finally, he united both to the metal base of the

globe with a clamp. Immediately the globe became dark and opaque.

"That is the measure of our vital forces," he said. "And now I will give you your instructions.

"It was my intention to ask you to press the lever which will send the high voltage through our bodies. But in case of any untoward results you would reproach yourself with being my slayer. I shall, therefore, myself press the lever, and lay upon you only the responsibility of recalling me to life again.

"When I press this lever it will send a current of electricity of several thousand volts directly through our bodies. The effect will be the same as that which is produced by an electrocution. Now it has always been my claim—although the authorities of our prisons would never permit me to demonstrate it—that the man who has suffered electrocution can invariably be revived by the proper methods, since the current merely paralyzes the nerve centers and suspends the vital functions, without destroying any of the tissues. The criminal who goes to the electric chair dies, not from the effects of the current, but under the surgeon's knife. I have especially contrived this instrument for the purpose of proving my contention, although I little imagined at the time I set it forth that I was likely to be the first subject. The soul, which is purely electrical, is attached to the body by extremely tenuous, but none the less substantial ligaments, and, when driven out by some violent shock, remains for some days floating above it, until the ligaments give way and set it free. By means of this mechanism I claim that the expelled soul can be conducted along the wire and stored within the globe, which is a perfect vacuum, and where its presence will be indicated by the appearance of a wisp of light.

"To sum up, I shall electrocute

myself and the imbecile child. You will wait until you see the two threads of flame appear within the center of the globe. Then you will fling back the lever, and again push it forward to the notch marked E. That will be all your task. The reversal of the current will again force each separate soul along the wire—mine, into my own body; and the imbecile's, I hope, into his."

"But if you do not awake?" I cried.

"You will then wait until some unusual symptom intervenes, either in the child or in myself. And now I confess that I am sufficiently human to feel a certain sense of apprehension. So give me your hand; remember, if this should be our last experiment, we have yet many more parts to play, and lives to play them in; be ready to play your own part sturdily in this."

HE GRIPPED my hand in farewell. My own answered the pressure; then I averted my head and waited. Meanwhile Brodsky, kneeling on the low table, in the position of a Japanese in some old print, about to commit the fatal thrust that should cause instantaneous death, braced himself against the rubber pillow and stretched out his hand. I heard the soft thud of the doctor's body as he collapsed sidewise; and suddenly the opaque globe became a dazzling blue, and blue fire spluttered along the wires. It was almost too bright for my eyes to look into it. Gradually it subsided, the globe became a pearly gray, and therewithin, dimly visible through the glass, were two bright flames. Butterfly-shaped, they seemed to pursue each other as goldfish in a bowl, circling and doubling upon their courses: now approaching each other, now dancing apart, now fused into one, elongating, and again retreating to opposite sides of the globe; yet never for one instant did

they cease to hover, with poised and pendulous wings. I stole a glance at the body of the doctor. He had fallen upon his side and lay motionless, apparently lifeless, his limbs outstretched and stiffened as those of a man in some cataleptic trance, while at his side, in the same state, the imbecile lay, with glassy eyes wide open. Was it indeed possible, I asked myself, that those two souls, one imbecile, the other a compendium of knowledge and fineness, should in reality be those foolish, circling, butterfly-shaped lights that hovered and danced continually? I must have watched them in fascination for fully five minutes before I suddenly recalled the doctor's instructions.

But my hands shook so that I could with difficulty lay them upon the lever. I caught it at last, reversed it, and sent it forward again to the notch E. Instantly the flames divided; there came a hiss and splutter, and the wire was once more aflame with the blue light. Then a convulsive trembling seized upon the limbs of the imbecile. He gasped, drew in a long breath, and sat up. His eyes fixed themselves gravely on mine. But it was no longer a glance of blankness, as though there were no mind behind the vision. He saw me; when I moved, the eyes followed mine, and a current of unintelligible babbling came from between the child's lips. But Brodsky lay as when he had fallen, nor was there any relaxation in the stiffened limbs.

A spasm of fear seemed to turn the muscles of my heart to stone. I stared into the bowl. There was but one light there now, a tiny, fluttering thing, that seemed each moment to become more and more attenuated. It danced more feebly, beating from side to side in inefficiency, now darting back, now dancing forward once again to where the wires entered the vacuum. I bent over the body of the doctor, chafing the hands in vain; I touched the cheeks, now growing

cold. More and more slowly moved that butterfly light. It hovered, a pitiful, tiny thing, poised in the midst of the globe, which was itself changing in color and slowly fading in brilliancy. Now it was a deep blue, merging into indigo, and from the edges black shadows seemed to creep forward and envelop that little spark at the heart of it. This became but a pin-point of light; then it glowed no more than the burnt-out end of a match. One instant it flickered up; then it went out abruptly, and the globe was utterly dark and opaque. I placed my hand once more on the doctor's. It was icily cold, and as I bent over him, I saw the stiffness go out of the muscles and the limbs relax.

Some frenzy must have overcome me next. I must have torn away the wires and overturned the globe, for, when I came to my senses, nothing remained of the apparatus except the lifeless bulk of the electrical machine, while all around me was a wreckage of wires. I lifted the doctor's body in my arms and carried him into his study. I laid him upon a lounge and injected strychnin into the veins. There was no response. I placed my ear against his heart; it did not stir. Against his lips I laid a little mirror of silvered glass. It was not clouded. And suddenly I felt a thing pulling at my coat. It was the imbecile child; it had crawled after me. Then I understood. This was the unusual symptom of which Brodsky had spoken. Then I knew that I had exhausted all my resources. I rushed to the telephone and summoned medical aid. Hours afterward, as it appeared to me, though it was in reality only a matter of minutes, a doctor arrived. I tried to stammer out some explanation, but he cut me short.

"Heart disease," he pronounced. "I warned him only last week that he must be prepared. There will be no need of an autopsy."

"But the soul!" I stammered. "The soul in the glass globe!"

The doctor looked at me gravely.

"You must lie down and rest," he answered. "It must have been a great shock to you." So I knew that my words would go for less than nothing.

I WAS ill for weeks after that. Friends took charge of the funeral, friends whom Brodsky had aided, who appeared in countless numbers from unexpected quarters. The funeral partook almost of the character of a public demonstration. Even I had never known the extent of Brodsky's benefactions. Even the physicians of the town, who had regarded him more or less with suspicion, participated in the ceremonies. The newspapers were filled with long accounts of the dead man's works; his psychical researches were dismissed lightly, but not contemptuously, as the vagaries of a great thinker, the relaxations of a scientist. When the will was read I found that I had been left sole executor and chief legatee. The remainder of the doctor's fortune was to go to endow the home which he had established.

Then, one day, while looking through the doctor's papers, I came upon a sealed letter addressed to me. I had forgotten all about it in the strain that I had gone through. Hastily I broke the seal and read:

"You must pardon me, my dear friend," ran the letter, "if for the second time I have wilfully deceived you. The first occasion, as you will remember well, was when you first came to me, when I hypnotized you in my study for the purpose of turning your mind from the gloomy thoughts of suicide that possessed you. On this occasion I felt impelled to say less than the truth for fear that you would attempt to dissuade me from my purpose.

"I told you that I intended to

make my most difficult experiment, to go through the gates of death and to search out and bring back with me the soul of the imbecile child. Forgive me for having made this statement. It was an impossibility. The electric current that I sent through my own body with my own hand destroyed once and for all the vital powers. Nothing on earth could have restored them. I tell you this in order that you may not think you were remiss or negligent in your endeavors to resuscitate me. The two flames that you will doubtless have seen within the globe were not the souls, but only those N-rays which are given forth from all living things, whether men, beasts or trees. When the last flame went out the organism was dead beyond possibility of recall.

"The child revived because the current was so graduated that it merely stunned, without destroying, that duller organism. Had it been of a force proportioned to that which passed through my own body, nothing could have revived him. But now, to explain more fully what it was my intent to do, and what I hope and think that I have done.

"As I have told you, I knew that no power on earth could bring the soul into the child's body. It was, in fact, born soulless, nothing more than a vital organism. It was my purpose, then, in dying, to transfer my own identity into that child's body, so that while the Ivan Brodsky whom you knew disintegrated slowly, according to the natural processes of the body, his spirit might gain a new lease of life and grow to manhood, forgetful of the old ills and troubles, eager to fulfil the work that I had laid down for myself.

"I leave him in your care. Doubtless within a few days he will begin to manifest a human intelligence. As he grows older he will have vague memories of my own life. He will repay your care with the truest affec-

tion, since I myself shall be his inspiring spirit, and this, you know, I feel for you. He will have, also, strange reminiscences, will recall faces of persons strange to him, but known to me. These recollections you will discourage. Remember that he is a new being, whose life is as yet an unwritten page, and that the past must remain sealed to him through all his life.

“Train him, then, in the medical profession, and guide his mind so that when he reaches maturity he will voluntarily take up those studies of mine where I have dropped them. I have embodied these in a typewritten document which you will find in a secret drawer at the back of my bureau.” [Here followed instructions for opening it.] “In these instructions you will learn much that I have never told you of, things that in the hands of evil men might plunge the whole world into barbarism and shake down the pillars of civilization.” [Here followed some purely personal instructions.] “But above all, remember that I leave everything to your absolute discretion, since all things are appointed to their own end, and if my hopes are vain, nothing can bring them to fruition.”

WHEN I had finished reading this letter I sat thinking for a long while. Then I went to the bureau

and, after some fumbling, found and pressed the secret spring. A drawer flew back. In it I found a typewritten paper, half covered with dried rose petals. I unfolded it and began slowly to read. . . . I read till the day was gone. . . . Then I committed it to the flames.

For I felt, and still feel that, many as were the evils which Brodsky cured during the brief period of our association, the world is better off without this knowledge of his. The risks were too many. And, after all, as he had always said, this is a world of light; there is a long eternity when we shall be shut off from external activities, when the things of the soul only will be of account. Let us not meddle with them here, but go about our appointed tasks in the manner set for us.

The boy is growing to manhood. Already he is planning to enter the medical school; I find in him odd traces of Brodsky, odd flashes of memory and intuitive appreciation of the things Brodsky cared for. But I discourage all his interest in the realm of psychic things. It may be that his will will prove stronger than mine, that he will succeed in taking up the doctor's work where Brodsky abandoned it. In such event I shall give way; until that happens I shall fulfil my trust in the spirit of my own interpretation.

