

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME V

NUMBER 1

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 325 N. Capitol Ave., 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. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in our 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. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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THE REMORSE of PROFESSOR PANEBIANCO



by Greye
La
Spina

Author of "The Tortoise-Shell Cat"

"CIELO, what an enormous crystal globe, Filippo!" exclaimed Dottore Giuseppe del Giovine, regarding the great inverted glass bell that hung over the professor's dissecting table. "What's the idea of that?" he added curiously.

The professor's black eyes rested upon the globe with the fondness of a parent. He pushed the table more centrally under the opening at the bell's lower extremity, then pulled on a chain operating a valve at the top.

"The purpose of this globe is to win me such recognition from the world of science as no man has ever enjoyed and no man after me can ever emulate," he responded, with a kind of grim enthusiasm.

"But how?"

The doctor was intensely interested.

"You are aware that Elena and I have long experimented on animals, to ascertain if that thing men call the 'soul' is at all tangible? We have now arrived at a very advanced point in our studies, so advanced that we are at a dead stop because we cannot obtain the necessary subjects for our next experiment."

"One can always find mice—or cats—or monkeys," said the doctor.

The professor shook his head decidedly.

"Such animals are things of the past, *caro amico*. We have seen the soul of a drowning mouse emerge from its body, in a spiral coil of vapor that wreathed its way out of the water to lose itself in the etheric spaces that include all life. We have watched the soul of a dying ape emerge in one long rush of fine, impalpable, smoke-like cloud that wound upward to become invisible as it, too, amalgamated with the invisible forces of the universe about us."

"I myself once saw what I believe might have been the soul of a dying man, as it departed from his body," asseverated the doctor, musingly. "Ah, if one could but detain that fine essence of immortality, what wonders could not one work in time? What mighty secrets would perhaps be discovered!"

"You understand, then, Giuseppe *mio*, what I await with anxiety? The subject for the most tremendous experiment of all! It is futile for me to attempt to make it upon one of the lower animals, since they do not possess the power of reason, and their souls would therefore be by far too tenuous for a successful experiment.

I have been trying for months to obtain possession of the person of some criminal condemned to death, that I might subject him to my theory as his dying breath fled, bearing with it his soul—that about which all men theorize, but which none have yet seen or conceived of as have I.”

“The idea is tremendous, Filippo. What have the authorities done about it?”

“They refuse to assist me. I cannot tell them all that I desire to do, naturally, or my rivals would try to get ahead of me. Their stupid, petty jealousy! *Quanto è terribile!*”

“Exactly what do you wish to do, and how is this bell to serve you?” inquired the doctor, a puzzled series of lines drawing across his forehead.

“I have observed, *caro mio*, that the vaporous soul of the lower animal is so much lighter than the ether around it that it withstands the pull of gravity and rises, swaying with whatever currents of air are in the atmosphere, always to a higher level, where it dissipates into invisibility.

“I have been trying to possess myself of a living human being whose life was useless to the world, that his death might be made of transcendent value through my scientific knowledge. I constructed this crystal bell for a wonderful and stupendous purpose. It is intended to hold the tenuous wraith of the subject of my experiment.

“The valve above, open at first, will permit the air to escape at the top of the bell as it becomes displaced by the ascending essence of the dying man’s soul. Then, when I pull the chain, thereby closing the valve, the soul would be retained by its own volatile nature within the bell, being unable to seek a lower level.”

“Filippo, you astound me!”

There was something more than astonishment in the doctor’s face, how-

ever, as his eyes searched the countenance of the professor sharply.

“My idea is indeed awe-inspiring, *caro dottore*. Your wonder is very natural,” said the professor graciously.

“It must be trying to have to wait so long for a suitable subject for your experiment,” ventured the doctor, with a side glance.

“Ah, how I shall love and venerate that human being who furnishes me with such a subject!” cried the professor fervently.

A deep sigh followed closely upon his words. The curtain hanging before the doorway was pushed to one side, as Elena Panebianco walked slowly into the room.

“How you will gaze upon that imprisoned soul!” cried she, with a passionate intensity that startled the doctor anew, as he turned his regard from her husband to her. “If it were a soul that loved you, how happy it would be to know that your entire thoughts were centered upon it, within the crystal bell! To see your eyes always fixed upon it, as it floated there within!”

She leaned weakly against the dissecting table, and her great eyes, dark with melancholic emotion, stared wildly out of her thin, fever-flushed face.

“*Tu sai impossibile!*” cried the professor. “What tragic jealousy is yours, Elena! A jealousy of things that do not as yet exist!”

ELENA did not reply. She loved too deeply, too passionately, too irrevocably. And the only return her husband made was to permit her assistance in his laboratory work. Her eager mind had flown apace with his; not that she loved the work for itself, but that she longed to gain his approbation. To him the alluring loveliness of her splendid body was as noth-

ing to the beauty of the wonderful intellect that gradually unfolded in his behalf.

In private, Filippo complained to the doctor that his wife was too demonstrative. She thought nothing of distracting his attention from important experiments, with pouting lips clamoring for a kiss, and not until he had hastily brushed her lips with his would she return to her work.

"I am obliged to bribe the woman with kisses," cried the professor, despairingly.

Elena had gone so far as to affirm to her husband that she was even jealous of his research, his experiments. That was unwise. No woman can interfere between a man and his chosen life-work. Such things are, as D'Annunzio puts it, "*piu che l'amore*" (greater than love), and prove relentless Juggernauts to those who tactlessly disregard the greater claims.

"He is worn out," said Elena to the doctor. "He has flung himself into his work to such an extent that nothing exists for him but that. He studies all night. He works all day. I have to force him to stop long enough to eat sufficient to maintain life."

"Go on, Elena, go on! When my head swims, I tie cold wet towels about it. When my brain refuses to obey me, I concentrate with inconceivable force of will upon my goal. Oh, Giuseppe *mio*, my very existence is bound up in this last experiment, which, alas! I am unable to complete because the authorities will not permit me to make use of the death of some criminal—a death that must be entirely useless to the scientific world, through their blind stupidity."

The doctor shrugged, with a gesture of his slender brown hands. His eyes sought Elena's face. Since he had been away the Signora Panebianco had altered terribly. She looked

too delicate; she had faded visibly. Hectic roses flamed in her cheeks. Her thin hands, too, had been too cold when she touched his in greeting. Her constant cough racked her slender body. It seemed to Giuseppe del Giovine that she had become almost transparent, so slender had she become from loss of flesh. As she went from the room slowly with a gesture of helplessness, he turned to the professor.

"Your wife is a very sick woman," he declared, abruptly.

"I suppose she must be," Filippo responded absently. "She's very nervous, I know. She disturbs me inexcusably with silly demands for kisses and caresses, actually weeping when she thinks I don't see her, because I refuse to humor her foolish whims. I've been obliged, more than once, to drive her away with cold looks and hard words, because she has tried to coax me to stop work, insisting upon my talking with her."

He began adjusting his apparatus with an abstracted air. It was as well that he did not see the expression of indignation and despair that flashed across the mobile face of the physician, who had long loved Elena in secret, but hopelessly, as he very well knew, because she was absolutely indifferent to anybody but her husband.

"Yes, Giuseppe, she interrupts my most particular experiments to caress me ardently, trying to bring my lips down on hers. Often I have reproved her severely for attempting to turn me aside from my life-work. The man whose intellect has driven him to enter the precincts of the great mystery cannot stop to dally with the folly of fools, and love is the greatest folly of all."

"Blind fool, you!" muttered the doctor under his breath. "Love is the very breath of life itself!"

"If Elena is to assist me in my last experiment, the greatest of all, I must

get a subject soon, for she is wasting away fast. Oh, yes, I have observed it. Death has his fingers at her throat."

His voice was the voice of the man of science; there was not the slightest intonation that might have indicated other than passing interest in the unhappy Elena.

"What I am afraid of," he resumed, "is that even a human being's spirit will not materialize properly within the bell, unless instructed previously. And how can I expect a criminal to lend himself voluntarily to an experiment that necessitates his death for its success? No, the fool would cling too closely to his miserable life, and might even refuse to listen when I tried to prepare and instruct him. I ought to have for my experiment someone who knows just what I want done; someone who will carry out my wishes faithfully. And where I am I to find such a person?" he finished lugubriously.

THE curtains over the doorway swayed to admit Elena. It was only too evident from her expression that she had heard part, if not all, of her husband's words. There was an incomprehensible expression within those dark orbs that shrank not from the glance the professor turned upon the intruder.

"There is but one person in the whole world who could, and would, be able to carry out your ideas," said she, deliberately.

Filippo whirled upon Dottore del Giovine, relief and joy flashing over his face. Del Giovine gave a short exclamation and took an involuntary step forward, horror written on his face. The other man turned to Elena, caught her hands in his, and gazed down into those pellucid depths whence came the glow of a fire that burned within her heart for him alone.

"Elena! Can you really mean it? You fill me with the most intense, most vivid gratitude and admiration—and," he added hastily as if with an afterthought, "love."

"My life is burning low," was her quiet reply. "If my death can profit you, it is yours for the asking—if you desire it."

Stiff with incredulous horror, the doctor stood rooted to the spot. Elena knew what the professor desired; she was ready, willing, to serve as the subject of his experiment. It was for her a final proof of her love for him—and a test of his love for her. She realized that she alone, of all the world, knew the occult foundations of the science that would enable her to carry out successfully the other part of the experiment.

With an access of lofty emotions, Filippo Panbianco gathered her into his arms and kissed her pallid brow. Elena's dark eyes closed ecstatically under this caress; she felt his heart beating high, but knew, alas! it was not for her; it was with renewed hope for the success of the stupendous performance to which he had long been irrevocably pledged.

"Now I shall vindicate myself to those who have called me a visionary, a madman!" Filippo cried in triumph.

His wife clung to him, her eyes seeking his with an appeal that he deliberately refused to recognize. He was only too afraid that Elena might change her mind, might refuse what he desired more than anything else on earth: the accomplishment of his plans.

Hanging eagerly and anxiously on her reply, the professor murmured: "When, Elena? When?"

"When you desire, my husband. The fire of my life is burning very low."

"This is infamous!" cried Giuseppe del Giovine, in an outburst that

shook him from head to foot, so intense was his emotion. "Elena, are you, too, insane? Do you realize what you are doing? Cannot you understand that Filippo is quite mad with his visions? Even if what he has dreamed could be possible, do you know that you have offered him your death? Elena, Elena, give me your life! Put yourself into my hands! I will cure you. I know that I can cure you," he begged wildly.

The beautiful young woman looked sadly and understandingly at the impassioned doctor. She shook her head slowly. Then her eyes turned again to her husband. Giuseppe del Giovine realized that his interference was futile; Elena's life, Elena's death, both lay in the hands of the man she loved. And (cruel irony!) it was her death that would mean most to the man she loved.

The professor called a servant and issued hasty instructions; his rivals were to be summoned at once, to see the successful outcome of his experiment. Then he turned to his wife, elation shining from his glowing countenance.

"Help me prepare!" he commanded.

An expression of awful agony passed over Elena's set face, but she motioned the agitated young doctor indifferently from her path, and began to set in position various instruments on the table adjacent to that under the crystal bell.

"What are you intending to do, Filippo?" demanded del Giovine, grasping the exalted dreamer authoritatively by one elbow.

Filippo shook off that restraining hand with impatience.

"Watch, and your patience will be rewarded," was the answer, as he smiled mysteriously.

"But Elena will not die today," said the physician, his hesitating lips forming the words reluctantly.

"She will die today," affirmed the professor, still smiling.

"*Dio mio!* He is absolutely mad!" Del Giovine would have fled for assistance, but the horror of the situation rooted his feet to the spot. Moreover, an imperative gesture from the proud Elena held him frozen there, his questioning eyes on hers.

"When the bell rings, Elena *mia*, I shall free your soul from its earthly shell, on which the hold is already so frail, and let it fly upward into the crystal bell," murmured Filippo, more tenderly than his wife had ever heard him speak to her before.

"I did not believe you could do it," Elena said, strangely. "I thought you really loved me! Have you no soul yourself, my husband, that you can so relentlessly sacrifice a woman who adores you, to add fuel to the fires of your ambition?"

"Elena! No more, I beg you. You surely will not withdraw what you offered freely, of your own will?"

He turned his face from hers, lest unexpected weakness of the flesh might undo his will.

The doctor knew that Elena had risked her all on a single toss of the dice. Womanlike, she believed that Filippo would throw aside the everlasting fame which he hoped would accrue to him, instead of accepting, as he was doing, the sacrifice of herself.

With face still averted, the professor motioned his wife to place herself upon the table under the crystal bell.

She gave one dreadful, tearing sob.

"For me, life has long since lost its value," said she. "I think I may be happier dead!"

She mounted the table and stretched herself upon it.

Footsteps sounded outside the door. Came a knock. The paralyzed del Giovine saw the professor catch up a glittering knife. And then Elena

turned her face upward, and gazed so earnestly at the determined and ruthless scientist that he hesitated, weakening. Del Giovine saw the beloved woman of his soul push her lips together for her husband's last kiss.

"Why spoil this last exalted moment?" murmured Filippo harshly.

He dared not risk refusing her whim, for delay would be fatal to his plans; were not his rivals waiting for the work of entrance, behind the closed laboratory door? Leaning over his wife, he hastily brushed his lips against hers. She flung up her arms at once and caught him to her with convulsive strength.

The young doctor heard her whisper, "Farewell, unhappy man!"

Del Giovine struggled to throw off the almost hypnotic spell that bound him.

Furious at the delay, and hearing another knock at the door, Filippo jerked himself away from that passionate embrace. The knife flashed—plunged downward—. Then he stood back, an expression of stupefied amazement on his face as he gazed enchanted at the crystal bell.

"It is her soul! Look! That pale mist of azure cloud that rises from her wounded bosom so lightly! See it sway and drift! Oh, ethereal vapor, now you are entering your crystal tomb! I can almost distinguish her features, Giuseppe. Look, how they change, almost imperceptibly, but surely, as the current of air moves out at the top of the bell to accommodate the entrance of her wraith!

"Why does she look at me so? She is pitying me—me! How can that be, seeing I am to be envied? Have I not attained in this moment to the loftiest pinnacle of my success? My triumph is complete! No—no—I need the envy—the jealous envy—the admiration and astonishment of my fellow-workers, to complete the glory of my success!"

Del Giovine succeeded in throwing off the lethargy of horror that had bound him; a cry burst from the hitherto paralyzed vocal cords of the young doctor.

The door burst open. Into the room rushed the little group of men who were confreres and rivals in science with Professor Filippo Panebianco. Wordlessly the triumphant professor pointed to the crystal bell, all eyes following his guiding finger.

"DIO!" he suddenly screamed, in agony and despair. "I forgot to close the upper valve! See—see—it is wide open! And there—there floats upon the air the last soft, wavering fringes of that wraith that was the spirit of my wife!"

He flung himself upon the lifeless form of the woman who had loved him too well, and beat at her with maddened fury.

"It is your fault, Elena! All your fault!"

Someone uttered a cry: "He has killed his poor wife!"

"Secure him, gentlemen! He has gone utterly mad!" warned the doctor, springing forward.

By sheer united strength they overcame the mad scientist, who fought against them furiously, uttering incoherent phrases as he struggled.

"Why did I stop to give her a silly kiss? Oh, if I had not stopped, I would have remembered to close the valve, and the wonder of my triumph would have remained to cover with the mantle of success what they are pleased so stupidly to call my crime.

"But alas! I was always a tender fool! Oh, if only I could have remained firm against her, when she desired that fatal kiss! I, who believed I would never experience the emotion of regret, shall suffer remorse for that weakness until I die!"