



By BARON CORVO

Baron Corvo's fearful experience described in minute detail by himself and illustrated with drawings done under his own supervision.

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BARON CORVO was the pseudonym of the English writer  
Frederick William Rolfe (1860-1913), author of the novel  
HADRIAN VII (1904) and other writings

## HOW I WAS BURIED ALIVE

TOWARDS the end of 188— I went into a Roman college to make a course of study for the priesthood. I entered as what is called a “Church Student,” which means that I had promised my Archbishop that I would serve as a priest in his arch diocese till the end of my life. But, after some months, I was kicked out into the streets of Rome late on a Saturday night, it being alleged that I had no Vocation.



From a] — BARON CORVO. [Photo

It happened that my friends were away at the time, arranging for the coming villegiatura.

When they returned, I presented myself to them as an expelled Church student with no Vocation. They were disgusted with me for making myself ill for what they called a fad, and quite surprised when a closer acquaintance than can be made at afternoon teas revealed how very nearly I had come to wrecking my constitution altogether. Rome was beginning to get very warm, and so we packed up and went to a villa on the hills; the idea being that we should spend the summer

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there, and that I was to be carefully fed and cockered back to health again before considering any plans for my future.

I was very happy indeed. I do not think there is a more beautiful place in the world than the Villa San Giorgio. It stands on the top of a rock amid the hills. Behind it, a glorious old garden winds down the crags to the Lago San Giorgio. Before it, the little town ripples to the foot of the rock till it meets the Campagna, and there the broad magnificences of verdant plains lose their outlines in the horizon of a turquoise sea. Close at hand we had a convent of Cappucini, and at least once a week mass was said in the chapel in the garden. It would be strange if I failed to get well and strong in this lovely spot, where I had only to command, and where I was surrounded by delightful people of all ages and ranks, who were devoted to me.

I was not so feeble as to be unable to get about, or to be precluded from following my favourite pursuits; but I had to be careful not to do too much, and to refrain from prolonged exertion either of mind or body. The doctor seemed to think that mine was not a case for medicine: but he exhibited *solfanella* to make me sleep, and said that time and a good rest from menial worry were all that was necessary to repair the mischief which my health had sustained from the long strain I had put upon it.

I ought to have explained I have a horror of all reptiles and creeping things, toads, lizards, snakes, *et hoc genus omne*. And already, while at the villa, I had received one serious shock, to say nothing of minor frights. I got my second shock on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September. It was Saint Michael's Eve, and I went to the chapel in the garden for a mouthful of prayer before going to bed. As the night was dark, I took a lantern and one of the duke's walking-sticks. Coming back through the still, dark Italian night, I heard a strange flip flap, flip flap on the on the path behind me. Thinking that it was Picchio, the Dowager's (R.I.P.) black-and-tan, who is very pious and will always accompany anybody to chapel, I took no notice; but presently I became aware that the old feeling of fright was coming over me. Resolving not to give way to it, I looked round for Picchio, turning the light from the lantern on on to the path behind me. He was not there; but I found that I was followed by a lot of yellow hump-backed frogs, who had been attracted by the light of the lantern from the fountain where they lived. There was positive swarm, and wherever the light fell upon the ground thither they hopped with rhythmical with rhythmical regularity. I swept them away with the Duke's great stick, (he affects the branch

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of a tree for walking purposes), and they solemnly picked themselves up again and went on hopping after the light. I did this again and again, and the same thing happened. I might have put the light out, but the idea of being alone in the dark where I could tread on or fall over one of these horrors was not to my liking, and so I took to my heels. When I got home I was ill. I suspected everything on the floors, and was nearly hysterical. But I did not lose hold of my resolution, and fought hard against my weakness until I was fairly myself again. Then I took a dose of *solfanella*, and they advised me to get a good night's rest, promising that I would be none the worse in the morning. But I was not at all sleepy, and sat and played bezique with Mario till the small hours. Before I went to bed I felt quite well, and exceedingly cock-a-hoop at the thought that once more I had conquered my habit of losing my faculties in the presence of reptiles.

Toto roused me at half past six in the morning. I was very drowsy and all my limbs ached, but I got up. And went down to the chapel for mass at eight. After breakfast I did not feel up to work, and lay on the couch in my studio reading the *Gulistan* of Saadi. I seemed too tired to do anything else; but my mental faculties were all right, and the day was a drowsy one. I exerted myself to go down to the family breakfast a noon, and I remember we were very merry because one of the boys accused his sister of wearing false hair, and pulled on some of her front curls with hair pins at the ends to prove his words. I on my part had a most agreeable conversation on the subject of Africa with P— A—, the great Cardinal's nephew, *not* son, who went out to the "refugium peccatorum" at Massowah, after that little affair with M— B—. At four, I took the bodyguard and went out to catch butterflies.

A new billiard-room had been added to the villa just before we began our villegiatura. It was entered either from the garden, or from

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the corridor, which leads from the round dining-room where the Prince of W— lunched when he was on his tour in Italy many years ago. The roof of the billiard-room was paved with red tiles, and there was a marble parapet round three sides of it. The fourth side was formed by the wall of the house, and thus the window of my studio had become a door opening upon this new terrace. You descended from it to the garden by a straight flight of steps at one side. When the terrace was still in the builder's hands, I had given strict orders that all lizards found thereon were to be put to death, because I did not want to give them a chance of breeding there, that I might keep at least one place free for myself; and my orders had been carried out so far that I had not as yet been troubled with the pests.

I came back from my walk a little before six, without having caught anything, and the walk had been more of a toil than a pleasure, because of the limp and drowsy feeling which still pervaded my frame. The boys went into the lower regions of the house with the sticks and the lethal bottles, and Toto came with me to the foot of the terrace steps where I took the butterfly-net from him because I like to keep it in the studio. When I got to the top of the steps there was a small grey lizard on the parapet, and I switched at it with the butterfly-net. I was quite close to it, and, dropping its tail, it *jumped up my left sleeve*. I gave a yell, and Toto came running up the steps. Frantic, I tore off my clothes, explaining the reason of my fright amid gasps for breath. I had stripped my coat and shirt, and then all the power went out of me and I fell to the ground.

Let it be clearly understood that I was perfectly conscious.

I made an effort to move, and I tried to speak, but I could do nei-



ther. My eye-glasses fell off and I wanted to put them on again, but I had no power to do so. Hence, after this, though I could hear what went on well enough, I could only see indistinctly.

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Toto howled, and tried to pick me up, and a lot of people came to see what was the matter. I made out Francesco, the butler, and I heard him send Tato flying for the doctor. While he was gone, I was lifted up and carried to my bed.

This is curious—that I did not feel them carry me. I saw them stoop—it was Sabbatino and Vittorio, the porter's son—and I saw the latter take my legs round the knees, and the former lift me under the arms; also I saw that I was lifted and carried through the studio window and up the main staircase to my bedroom; but I felt neither the grasp of their arms, the movement of carrying, nor the putting me down on the bed.

Toto came in with the doctor and the old lady. She sat down at the foot of the bed, while the doctor felt my pulse and listened at my chest. Then he told the servants to fill the bath with warm water. I heard them turn the taps on in the next room. While this was being done, the Dowager kissed my hand and retired, saying nothing, but when she stooped I saw that she was crying. This hurt me, and I tried to rouse myself, to speak to her, but could not. When she was gone the doctor and Sabbatino took off the remainder of my clothes: my flannel trousers, socks, shoes, cord, and scapular, and I was put in the bath. I could see that the water, which came up to my chin, was steaming, and that Toto, stripped to the waist, supported me. Presently the doctor put a thermometer under my tongue, and took my temperature. After a while he told them to take me out of the water and rub me briskly with the towels. I saw them do this, but felt nothing. The doctor left the room while they were rubbing me, and when he returned I saw that he had a Winchester quart bottle in his hand, like those I used in my photographic dark room. He poured some of its contents into a basin, holding his nose at the same time, then he put in water, and brought it to the marble slab on which I was lying. Now the room was filled with a somewhat pungent smell, which I recognised at once. The bottle contained my ammonia at 88o. Toto and Sabbatino sponged my body and limbs with this solution, and the doctor held a little sponge, which he had squeezed out after soaking it with a few drops of the undiluted ammonia, to my nostrils, and at intervals he pressed the same sponge to my temples. I perfectly remember wondering why my eyes, which I was unable to shut, though I had instinctively tried to do so several times, did not water, and why the smell of the ammonia did not seem up to its normal strength. I could make out that both the servants and the doctor were greatly inconvenienced by it, but on me it had no unpleasant effect whatever. In fact, I may say that all through these proceedings my mental attitude was that of an onlooker with not very much interest in the affair.

I tried to make out the expression on the doctor's face but it did not come within my limited focus, and, though I could see well e-

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nough to distinguish outlines to some extent, I was not able to fill in the details.

It began to get dark, and the doctor sent for lamps. Then he refilled the bath with hot water, and had me placed in it. Toto supporting me as before, The doctor turned up his sleeves, and he and Sabbatino, instructed by him, began a kind of massage on my body as it lay in the water.

In a little while they stopped this, and opened the waste-pipe of the bath. I saw the water flowing away. Then Toto laid down my head, and, directed by the doctor, stood on a chair by like side of the bath, having in his hand the rose which hangs from the ceiling by an india-rubber tube. The doctor turned the tap at the bath-foot which governs the shower, and I saw the spray rush out from the rose and come down upon me. Toto moved it about for some time, so that each part of my body and limbs received the shower. Then he held it off while Sabbatino turned me over on to my face, and when this was done they gave me the shower on the back.

I cannot say that I felt it; but whether through some natural process unknown to me, or whatever else, I did begin to think that I could distinguish between hot and cold. Of course I knew that the bath water was hot, because I saw the steam, and that the shower water was cold, because I could see no steam. Besides, I knew that the shower was not supplied from the hot-water pipe. Nevertheless, when I had been rained on, back and front, for some minutes, I was certainly conscious of a new sensation.

After a bit the doctor shut off the shower, and Toto came down from the chair. While Sabbatino turned me over, so that I lay on my back in the bath, the doctor took Toto's place on the chair and unscrewed the rose. Next he had the shower turned on to the full, and at the same time he directed the solid rush of water on to my chest, holding the tube from which it flowed high over his head. As this went on, the sensation of being able to feel, as well as to hear, smell, and see, came more strongly upon me, and I began to be conscious of the bottom of the bath in which I was lying and of the sides against which my arms rested. As the stream of water fell upon me, I heard it trickle away down the open waste-pipe. I felt the glow of my skin with the friction and the cold water, and a drowsy peace seemed to overwhelm me. That is the last thing I can remember.

In relating this experience I am taking great pains to be very minute about the things I can speak of from personal knowledge. What happened during my unconsciousness was gathered by me from the people actually concerned, and I place the facts here to render my narrative a consecutive one.

After I had been subjected to the cold douche for nearly a quarter of an hour, I was taken out of the bath and dried, laid on a bed, and covered with a sheet. Then I was left alone, while the doctor went downstairs and informed the family that all his efforts to restore me

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had failed, and that I was dead through the failure of the heart's action, which had undoubtedly been caused by a shock of fright to a hyper-sensitive organization.

The arrangements following a death in an Italian family are somewhat different from those which have place in England, and according to the law the burial must be accomplished within forty-eight hours of the death.

The Fr. Guardian of the Cappucini had been summoned with the doctor, and was present when the latter made his report. On hearing it he went up to the convent for some of the friars to get me ready for the tomb, and meanwhile the whole household left the villa, and went to a house across the gardens for the night, for it was now eleven o'clock. The friars came down and dressed me, put me in a coffin which they brought with them, nailed me up, and carried me down to the chapel in the garden, where they left me for the night.

At nine the next morning the whole convent came to make the final arrangements. The masons had been at the chapel since six, and their work was already done. The friars then put the coffin on a small catafalque in the middle of the floor, covered it with a pall (the Italian coffin is not made for show), and stood lighted candles round it. Then they made the usual preparations for a Black Mass. At ten, the family filled the chapel, and servants and the tenantry knelt on the steps and in the garden.

I had better describe the chapel before going further. It was built by the Dowager (R.I.P.) as a resting-place for the body of her second son, Don Muzio, who died excommunicated for the share he had taken in the Unification of Italy. The shape was an oblong, about 40ft. by 20ft. At one end was an apse 15ft. deep, wherein the altar stood, and at the other end a large doorway, approached from the garden by a flight of steps. The side walls were double, each wall being 2ft. thick, and there was a space of 5ft. between them. This space was fitted up like the walls in the catacombs, with a series of "loculi." They were oblong chambers, 10ft. long by 5ft. deep, by 5ft. high, and the white marble slabs which closed them formed the interior walls of the chapel. Only one of the wall slabs bears any inscription yet; it is the locus of Don Muzio mentioned above, which is the middle one of the second tier on the epistle side the chapel. The locus they had opened for me was exactly over it. The method of burial was simple enough. The coffin was placed on the shelf prepared for it when the service was over, and after the people had gone away the masons filled up the space with concrete, and closed it with the marble slab, on which the name and style of the dead person were afterwards engraved.

I am now able to take up the story from my own point of view. I mentioned before that I lost consciousness just as I was gaining my sense of touch, and that this losing of consciousness was like nothing



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else than falling asleep. I cannot fix the exact moment when I did fall asleep, any more than I can say to a minute or two exactly when I woke up. The first thing I can distinctly remember is a slight clanking of metal, the sound of footsteps, and the rustle of silk, then I smelt incense (*gum olibanum*, a smell one can never mistake), and felt the air to be warm and very stuffy.

The footsteps and the rustling ceased, and the strong voice of Fra Leone chanted quite close to me, “Et ne nos inducas in tentationem”; and a body of voices responded, “Sed libera nos a malo.”

Whether my eyes were open or not I could not tell, because I could not feel them, but I knew that I was in darkness and covered with perspiration. I had by no means as yet realized my situation, though I was conscious that I was lying on my back, with my hands folded over something on my breast, in some hot, dark place.

Presently I heard Fra Leone break out again: “Pater noster,” and then the clanking of the chains of the thurible, and the rustling, and the footsteps.

“This,” I said to myself, “is a Requiem.”

I lay there quite undisturbed, except by the heat, and listened to the rest of the service. When it was over, I heard the people go away. The old lady waited behind the rest, and chattered with the Fr. Guardian at the door. She was not many feet away from me, and I heard distinctly every word she said. I will not put it all down, for reasons of my own; but I was amused when she suddenly got into one of her rages and said it was a murder.

“A cold-blooded murder. The poor boy swore that he had a Vocation, and he put up with all the miseries in the world for it, and

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never told us. They ruined his nerve and broke down his health, and then turned him out, because he wouldn't take the rector's hints to give him his dressing-bag (it was my present to him, the dear child), and pretended that he had no Vocation. I sent Lucio to find out all about it. I did."

"But, Excellency," protested the unfortunate Fr. Guardian, "they were holy men, and men of rank and experience, who pronounced upon his Vocation—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted the Dowager "and though I can't excuse their brutality, I thought they might be right about the priesthood. Who could be if they were not? But the boy stuck to it through thick and thin, and I didn't let him know my opinion because he was so very sore about it, and I just filled the house all through the summer with the loveliest girls I could get hold of, any one of whom would have made him an excellent wife, and I watched to see if he would take a fancy to any of them, but no, not a bit of it. He was always very nice and kind and polite, and all that, and made himself very much liked by everyone, but he never took any interest in them—he wasn't that sort of man. Oh, and you know what I mean." And so on and so on. Then she walked away with the Fr. Guardian, still rhapsodizing.

When she had gone there were some more movements in the chapel—footsteps and men's voices speaking low. I heard Fra Leone say:—

"Take off the pall."

I heard the movement of a heavy cloth, and immediately the air in my box became much cooler; then I tried to open my eyes, and succeeded. I could see narrow streaks of light between the planks in front of my face. While I was looking, I became aware that the coffin was being slowly raised with a kind of swinging motion. Presently it stopped rising, and went sideways. Then the bottom of it grated, and it remained still. I felt them take off the loops at the head and foot, and I felt them push the coffin a little. I heard them tidying up the chapel, and then I was left in silence. Still I was not able to make any sign, nor did I feel either anxiety, or fear, or interest of any kind whatever. I was quite comfortable, and rather drowsy.

It appears that I must have succumbed to my desire to sleep and that I must have slept soundly for some hours. I should state here that after opening the *loculus* early in the morning the mason had been obliged to send to Rome for the concrete to wall me up, which did not reach San Giorgio till the evening.

When I woke again I confess that I woke with a start. At first I could not understand the the position at all, but on collecting my thoughts I began to recall what had passed since I saw the lizard on my parapet. I did not move; indeed, I made no attempt to do anything but to mentally recapitulate my recollections. While I was doing this, I noticed that, though the light which came through the four crevices

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in front of my face was dimmer than I remembered it before, it was stronger from the left hand one than from the others. On considering this, after I had settled with myself that I was shut up in a coffin in my tomb in the chapel wall, with a crucifix in my hands (I could distinctly feel the feet of the Figure under the ball of my forefinger) and the beads of a rosary trickling over my knuckles, I was able to judge that the light was stronger on the left, because that side of the loculus was still open to the interior of the chapel, while on the other side was the blank wall. Then I wondered whether I really should be buried alive. I resolved to say some prayers (it arranges one's thoughts somehow), and I repeated the one: "O, Angelo benignissimo, mio custode, tutore, maestro, guida, e difesa, sapientissimo consigliere, e fedelissimo mio amico, al qual io storaccomandato la bonta del Signore," etc. I concluded by begging my Angel Guardian to help, if it were God's will that I should get out, and to take my soul to purgatory if I had to die where I was.

Then I made up my mind to try to move. I said, "Glorious Saint Michael, give me some of your strength with which you drove the devil down to hell," and then I moved my head a little to one side. That was all right. and I knew I was going to get out.

I was quite happy, and very deliberate in what I did. First, I began to investigate the dimensions of my coffin, and found that it fitted me tightly. It was just a long box of unplanned planks, like an orange-box, and the top sounded thinner than the sides. I could lower my hands on to my thighs, and pass them over my face, and I could just uncross my feet. The thing to was to try and turn over on to my side so that with my hands under me I could lever the lid open with my shoulder. I knew perfectly well that I ought to be cautious, for the shelf on which my coffin rested might very well be on the top row, and in that case, if I burst it open with much violence, I might break my neck by falling about 25ft. on to the chapel floor. So I began slowly to try to turn. Pressing my shoulders and heels against the bottom was the first movement, for the box was too narrow for me to get my hands to my sides. In this way I found that I could make a good lever with my knees, and after all, though my natural desire was to get my head free first, it seemed better to loosen the lid any way, and do the turning over when I had made a little more room. So I started again by planting my heels firm, and drawing my body down to my feet. I remember chuckling when I became aware that I had on a pair of sandals and a loose gown, but I found out what it was later on.

Gradually I felt the lid bending, and the moment when I experienced the first slip of the nails was one absolute bliss. My head was soon off the pillow, and then I gained a good purchase on the lid. A steady pressure loosened the nails thoroughly and I heard a riving and a rending. Now I was able to use my hands to push upwards, and little by little I got the three planks loose, and pushed them away.

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One clattered down into the chapel on my left hand and another remained sticking to the side of the coffin by its own splinters.

Then I sat up. The one thing in the whole world that I wanted at that moment was my eye-glasses. My short sight was bad enough, but added to that I could hardly bear the light which streamed in through the open door. But to take things calmly, I sat there shading my eyes, and saying the Litanies of Loretto to the Madonna del Portone.

Then I considered how I should get down. It did not then occur to me that, if I only waited long enough, the masons or somebody would be sure to turn up, but I set to work to carry out plans of my own. The floor looked a long way off, and I was afraid to let myself drop on to the tops of the faldstools which lined the wall under me. If I jumped clear of them I should land on the marble floor, which was as slippery as glass, and hard, too. Then I remembered that the friars had raised the coffin to its loculus by something of the nature of a pulley; and, sure enough, I could make out a rope dangling from some point in the roof of the chapel, which was beyond my sight. I fished for it with one of the planks of my coffin lid, and thanks to a 2in. wire nail which projected at right angles to one end, I soon had the rope in my grasp. I pulled on it and found that it went up, perhaps a yard. Then I let it out the other way, and found that it ran over a grooved wheel and had a large hook at the other end. So I pulled again till I got the hook fixed in such a way that it jammed in the wheel, and then I swung myself out of my grave.



"I FISHER FOR THE ROPE WITH ONE OF THE PLANKS."

There was a most awful clatter as I came away from the loculus, for my death clothes caught on one of the coffin nails and brought the whole thing down. The weight of the box was more than the cloth

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would stand, and as I descended it ripped the gown from the hip to the bottom, and tore my legs at the same time. On alighting on the floor, I found that I had been buried, as I always desired, in the Franciscan habit, for I have made my profession in the Third Order; and that I was none the worse for what I had gone through, except my scratched legs and the chafing of my hands as I slid down the rope.

The next thing to do was evidently to get home, but I knew that there would be a scene, and that everyone would be frightened into fits, if I made my appearance unannounced, and so I resolved to go up to the Cappucini. An application to the sacristy pincushion disguised the rent in my habit, and having brought the hood well down over my face, I set out with my head bent down, in case I should meet anybody. If I had done so, it would not have mattered, for no one could have known me from one of the Frati.



There is little more to say. Of course, there was a hullabaloo at the convent. Padre Pio went to the family with the news of my resuscitation, and they sent him and my eye-glasses back in the brougham to fetch me at once. As we drove up to the garden door we saw the masons come tearing down the Olmata with the fragments of my coffin.

Oh, and then I was put to bed, and wept over, and made a lot of, and a few days later the old lady and I made our escape to Spezzia, and went for a little yachting, till we all went back to Rome at the beginning of November.