

Stories Toto Told Me

By Baron Corvo

III—A Caprice of the Cherubim

WHEN you have the happiness, sir, to see the Padre Eterno sitting upon His throne, I can assure you that, at least, your eyes will be delighted with the sight of many splendid persons who are there also.

These, you know, are called the angels, and they are in nine rows. All these rows are in the shape of an egg with pointed ends, just like that gold ring on your finger. Those in the first row are named serafini. Those in the second row are called cherubini, and you will find their appearance quite beautiful and curious to look at. They have neither arms, nor bodies, nor legs, like the other angels, but are simply heads like those of little boys. Their eyes are as brown as the shadows on the stream where you fished last Thursday, when the sun was shining through the trees. Their skin, if you will only believe me, has the colour and brightness of the blue jewels which la Signora Duchessa sometimes wears, and their hair waves like the sea at Ardea. They have no ears, but, in the place where the ears of a boy would be, they have wings shaped like those of a sand-piper, and blue as the sky at day-dawn. These flutter and shine for ever in regular watches in the
second

second ring of the Glory of the Highest, and cool the perfumed air with the gentle quivering of their feathers.

Once upon a time some of the cherubini came to hear of the pastimes with which people in the world weary themselves, and they humbly asked permission of the Padre Eterno to make a little *gità* down to the earth, and to have a little devil to play with next time they were off duty. And the Padre Eterno, who always lets you have your own way when He knows it will teach you a lesson, making the sign of the cross, said, "It is allowed to you."

So the following day a very large number—I believe about ninety-five millions, but I should not like to be quite sure, because I do not exactly know—of these beautiful little blue birds of God were taken by San Michele Arcangiolo down into the world, and they perched on the trees in the gardens of the Palazzo Sforza Cesarini in that city over the lake.

San Michele Arcangiolo left them there, and made the second of his journeys into the pit of hell. The first, you know, was after he had conquered the King of the devils in a dreadful duel and bound him in chains and flames for ever and the day after. As he passed along the pathway, down the red-hot rocks that line that dreadful road, the flames of the burning devils licked up till they met the cool air of Heaven which San Michele Arcangiolo breathed, and curved backward and still upward, forming a sort of triumphal arch of yellow flame above his head.

When he arrived at the gate where hope must be laid down, he called aloud that the Father and King of gods and men had occasion for the services of a young imp named Aeschmai Davi. The arch-fiend shook in his chains with rage, because he was obliged to obey, and caused a horrible demon to flash into bodily shape from a puddle of molten brimstone.

If

If you looked at his face or his body, you would have thought he was a boy about fourteen years old ; but his eyeballs glittered with the red of a burning coal. If you looked at his arms, you would have thought he was a bat, for wings grew there of spikes and skin. Oh, and he had nasty little horns in his hair, but it was not hair but vipers ; and from his waist to his feet he was a he-goat, and all over he was scarlet. It was a different scarlet to the scarlet coat of that English soldier whom I saw once near the Porta Pia of Rome. I can only make you understand what I mean by saying that it was the colour of the ashes of burning wood which are almost dead, but which you have blown up again into a fiery glow. He was of the most bad and hideous from his hoofs to his horns ; and no one, whether he was a saint, or an angel, or a man like you, sir, as long as he had the protection of the Madonna, would need to be a bit afraid of him, because his nastiness was clear, and he could be seen through like a piece of glass, and in the middle of him there was his dirty dangling heart as black as ink.

San Michele Arcangiolo, who knows exactly how to deal with everybody, and especially with a *scimunito* like this, stuck his spear into the middle of the little devil's stomach, just as Gianetta would spit a woodcock for roasting, and holding it out before him, because it is always best to see mischief in front of you, carried the wriggling, writhing little devil up into the world. The flames, as before, licked upward and around the great archangel, but never a feather was singed nor a blister came upon his whitest skin, because they could not pierce the ice of his purity ; but they made the little devil kick and struggle just as I should, sir, if you whipped me naked with a whip of red-hot wires, instead of with the lilac twig you do use when I am disobedient.

So they came into the Prince's garden, and having released
the

the little devil from his uncomfortable position, San Michele Arcangiolo—who, because he commands the armies in heaven, is very fond of soldiers—went down into the city to pass a half-hour inspecting the barracks.

When the little devil found himself free, he could hardly believe his good luck, and sat for a few minutes rubbing the sparks out of his eyes, and wondering what his next torture would be. Meanwhile, the cherubini sat in the trees saying nothing, but watching with all their might, for they never had seen such a thing before.

Presently, as nothing happened, the little devil plucked up what small courage he had and took a sly look round. The first thing he saw was the fountain near the magnolia tree; and as the devils know very well what water is, although a rare commodity in their country, where one drop is worth more than all the wealth the world has ever seen, he plunged head first into the basin to cool the burning pangs which always torment him. And still the cherubini said not a word, but watched with all their eyes.

Now the basin, sir, is a deep one, as you know, because you have often dived in there yourself when the sun was in Leo. And the little devil disappeared under the water. But a moment after his head popped up, twitching with pain, amid clouds of steam and a frightful hissing, and he screamed very much and began to clamber over the edge as fast as possible.

When he got on to the grass, he jumped and skipped all over the place, and shook his wings and squeezed his hairy legs, and stroked his naked breast, and rolled about on the ground, and leaped and howled, till the cherubini found him most diverting, and laughed so much that they tumbled out of the trees and came and fluttered round the little devil, for this was a far funnier entertainment even than that which they had promised themselves.

And the reason of it all is very easy to understand, if you will
only

only think. You see, one of the torments that the devils and the damned have to bear is to be always disappointed ; they never get their wishes fulfilled ; all their plans, no matter how carefully they construct them, fall to the ground ; all their arrangements are always upset at the very last moment, and everything goes by the rule of contrary. So when the wretched little creature plunged into the cold water, the heat of hell-flame boiled it, and the Breath of God made it hotter still ; and, instead of being cooled at all, the little devil got handsomely scalded.

Now, when the cherubini had had their fill of laughter, and could observe accurately this sight which was to them so strange, they saw great patches of scalded flesh hanging in shreds and strips from his neck and sides and back and belly, and the shining leather of his wings crinkled and warped, and the horn of his hoofs beginning to peel, and they would have felt sorry if to grieve over a little devil had not been wrong. So they said nothing, hovering in the air around him, and looking at him with their clear eyes all the time.

The little devil looked at them too, and, being a cheeky little beast, he asked who, the hell, they were staring at.

They said that they wanted to play with him, and they desired him to do some more tricks, and to tell them merry stories, and where he came from, and what he did there, and how he liked it, and why he had that nasty black heart-shaped blotch hanging in the middle of his inside, and many other things.

And the little devil said that he had had a bad accident, and wasn't going to hurt his throat by shouting to a lot of blue birds up there in the sky, and if they wanted him to answer their questions, they must come down lower, because he was in great pain.

And the cherubini wondered very much where the pain was that the little devil said he was in, and what kind of thing this
pain

pain could be : but, as they were curious and wanted to know, they descended a bit until they formed in a ring around the little devil's head.

And there they became aware of a horrible stench, and they said to one another : "He stinks—stinks of sin !" But, because they wished to be diverted, they resolved to put up with small inconveniences for a while.

Still the little devil was not satisfied ; and perceiving that these would be very agreeable playmates, he tried to make a good impression. So he flopped down upon his stomach and propped his chin up in his hands, and invited the cherubini to come and sit round him and listen to such tales as they had never heard before. And the cherubini came a little lower, but they did not sit down.

And then other things happened.

And suddenly the cherubini found that they did not desire to play with this little devil any longer ; and with one swoop of their wings, sounding like the strong chord you strike, sir, when you begin to play on your citherna in the evening, they went back into Paradise ; while the earth opened under the little devil, and a red flame, shaped like a hand with claws, came up and gripped and squeezed him so tightly round the waist, that his face bulged, and his eyes went out like crabs', and his breast swelled like pumpkins, and his shoulders and arms like sausages, and his middle was like Donna Lina's, and the skin of his hairy thighs became balloons and burst, and then he was tossed back into his puddle of molten brimstone.

When the Ave rang, and this company of cherubini went on duty around God's Throne, the Padre Eterno observed, from the expression of their faces, that they had been insulted and their feelings hurt. And when His Majesty deigned to inquire the reason, they replied that the little devil whom He had allowed them

to

to play with had been very rude, and they had no desire to see him any more ; for they had asked him to show them funny tricks and to tell them merry stories, and where he came from, and what he did there, how he liked it, why he had a nasty black heart-shaped blotch dangling in the middle of his inside, and so forth, and that he had said he would be pleased to answer all this and to play with them if they would come and sit down on the grass round him, but they had to reply that they were not able to sit down, and the little devil had asked why not, and they had answered politely that they had not the wherewithal, and then the little devil jumped up from the ground where he was lying with his legs a-straddling and showed them that he could sit down, and had turned head over heels, and laughed and made a gibe and a jeer of them because he could do things they could not do, and had also done many other disgusting tricks before them, which had caused them much offence, and so they were bored and came back to Heaven.

They added that they did not desire to mix up with that class of person again, and begged pardon if they had seemed to prefer their own will this time.

And the Padre Eterno smiled, and at that Smile the light of Heaven glowed like a rainbow, and the music rose in a strain so beautiful that I believe I shall die when I hear it, and He made the sign of the cross and said : "It is well, my children, and God bless you. *Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus, ✠ Pater et ✠ Filius et ✠ Spiritus Sanctus.*"

IV—About Beata Beatrice and the Mamma of San Pietro

“**A**H, sir, don't be angry with me, because I really do love her so ! What else can I do when she is as pretty as that, and always good and cheerful and patient ? And when I met her last evening by the boat-house I took her into my arms asking her to kiss me, and, sir, she did. And then I told her that I loved her dearly, and she said she loved me too. And I said that when I grew up I would marry her, and when I looked into her eyes they were full of tears so I know she loves me ; but she is ashamed because she is so poor and her mamma such a hag. But do I mind her being poor—the little pigeon ? Ma che ! for when I feel her soft arms round me and her breath in my hair, then I kiss her on the lips and neck and bosom, and I know it is Beatrice, her body and her soul, that I want and that I care for, not her ragged clothes.”

Toto jumped off the tree trunk and stood before me, with all his lithe young figure tense and strung up as he went on with his declamatory notices.

“Has not your Excellency said that I am strong like an ox, and will it not be my joy to work hard to make my girl happy and rich and grand as the sun ? Do you think that I spend what you give me at the wine-shop or the tombola ? You know that I don't. Yes, I have always saved, and now I shall save more, and in a year or two I shall ask your permission to marry her. No, I don't want to go away, or to leave you. May the devil fly away with me to the pit of hell and burn me for ever with his hottest fire if I do ! Nor will Beatrice make any difference to your Excellency ; you need never see her, you need never even know

that there is such a flower of Paradise, such an angel, living near you if you don't wish to know it. And I can assure you that Beatrice has the greatest respect for you, and if you will only be so good and so kind as to let us make each other happy she will be quite proud and glad to serve you as well as I do, and to help me to serve you too. And, sir, you know how fond you are of a fritto? Ah well, Beatrice can make a *rigaglie* so beautiful that you will say it must have come straight from Heaven; and this I know because I have tried it myself."

He flung himself down on the ground and kissed my hands, and kissed my feet, and wept, and made me an awful scene.

I told him to get up and not be a young fool. I said that I didn't care what he did, and asked if I had ever been a brute to him, or denied him anything that was reasonable.

He swore that I was a saint, a saint from Heaven, that I always had been and always should be, because I could not help myself; and was going down on his knees again, when I stopped that, and said he had better bring me the girl and not make me hotter than I was with his noise.

"To tell you the truth, sir," he replied, "I was always quite sure that you would have pity upon us when you knew how very much we loved each other. And when you caught us last night I told Beatrice that now I must let you know everything, because I was certain that as long as I did not deceive you (and you know that I have never done so) there was nothing to be afraid of; and I told her you would without doubt like to see her to give her good counsel, because she was my friend; and she said she would call that too much honour. Then I felt her trembling against my heart, so I kissed her for a long time and said she must be brave like I am; and, sir, as you are so gracious as to want to see her, I have taken the liberty of bringing her and she is here."

I had

I had always admired the cleverness of this lad, and was not much surprised at his last announcement.

"Where?" I said.

"I put her behind that tree, sir," and he pointed to a big oak about twenty yards away. I could not help laughing at his deepness; and he took courage, I suppose, from my auspicious aspect. All sorts of clouds of hesitation, uncertainty and doubt moved out of his clear brown eyes, while his face set in a smile absurd and complacently expectant. "Shall I fetch her, sir?"

I nodded. I had had some experience of his amours before; but this was a new phase, and I thought I might as well be prepared for *anything*. He went a few paces away, and disappeared behind the oak tree. There was a little rustle of the underwood, and some kissing for a minute or two. Then he came out again, leading his companion by the hand. I said I was prepared for anything, but I confess to a little gasp at what I saw. It was not a boy and girl who approached me, but a couple of boys—apparently, at least. They came and stood beside the hammock in which I was lying. Toto, you know, was sixteen years old, a splendid, wild (*discolo*) creature, from the Abruzzi, a figure like Cellini's Perseus; skin brown, with real red blood under it; smooth as a peach, and noble as a god. He had a weakness for sticking a dead-white rose in the black waves of hair over his left ear, and the colour of that rose against his cheeks, flushed as they were now, was something to be truly thankful for. I used to make him wear white clothes on these hot summer days down by the lake—a silk shirt with all the buttons undone and the sleeves rolled up, showing his broad brown chest and supple arms, and short breeches of the same, convenient for rowing. (He had half-a-dozen creatures like himself under his command, and their business was to carry my photographic and insect-hunting apparatus,

apparatus, and to wait upon me while I loafed the summers away in the Alban hills or along the eastern coast.) The seeming boy, whom he had called Beatrice, looked about fourteen years old, and far more delicately dainty even than he was. The bold magnificent independence of his carriage was replaced in her by one of tenderness and softness, quite as striking in its way as the other. She wore her hair in a short silky mop like Toto, and her shirt was buttoned up to the spring of her pretty throat. She was about as high as her boy's shoulder, and stood waiting before me with her poor little knees trembling, and a rosy blush coming and going over her face. They were so exquisitely lovely, in that sun-flecked shade with the blue lake for a background, that I could not help keeping them waiting a few minutes. Such pictures as this are not to be seen every day. Presently he put his arm round her neck, and she put hers round his waist, and leaned against him a little. But he never took his eyes off mine.

“Go on, Toto,” I said, “what were you going to say?”

“Ah, well, sir, you see I thought if Beatrice came to live with us—with me, I mean—it would be more convenient for you if she looked like the rest of us, because then she would be able to do things for you as well as we can, and people will not talk.”

It struck me immediately that Toto was right again as usual; for, upon my word, this girl of his would pass anywhere for a very pretty boy, with just the plump roundness of the Florentine Apollino, and no more.

“So I got some clean clothes of Guido's, and brought them here early this morning, and then I fetched Beatrice and put them on her, and hid her behind the tree, because I knew you would scold me about her when you came down to read your newspapers; and

and I determined to tell you everything, and to let you know that the happiness of both of us was in your hands. And I only wanted you to see her like this, in order that you might know that you will not be put to any discomfort or inconvenience if you are so kind as to allow us to love each other."

This looked right enough ; but, whether or not, there was no good in being nasty-tempered just then, so I told them to be as happy as they liked, and that I would not interfere with them as long as they did not interfere with me. They both kissed my hands, and I kissed Beatrice on the forehead, and cheeks and lips, Toto looking on as proud as a peacock. And then I told him to take her away and send her home properly dressed, and return to me in half an hour.

I could see very well that all these happenings were natural enough, and that it was not a part I cared to play to be harsh or ridiculous, or to spoil an idyll so full of charm and newness. Besides, I have reason to know jolly well the futility of interfering between the male animal and his mate.

So when Toto came back I said nothing discouraging or *ennuyant* beyond reminding him that he ought to make quite sure of possessing an enduring love for this girl, a love which would make him proud to spend his life with and for her, and her only. I told him he was very young, which was no fault of his, and that if he would take my advice he would not be in a hurry about anything. He said that my words were the words of wisdom, and that he would obey me just as he would the Madonna del Portone in her crown of glory if she came down and told him things then and there ; that he had known Beatrice since they had been babies together, and had always loved her far better than his sisters, and in a different way too, if I could only understand. Last night when he had held her in his arms he told her that he knew she wished
him

him well, and felt himself so strong and she so weak, looking so tender and so tempting, that all of a minute he desired her for his own, and to give somebody a *bastonata* of the finest for her, and to take her out of the clutches of that dirty mean old witch-cat of a mamma of hers who never gave her any pleasure, kept her shut up whenever there was a festa, and, Saints of Heaven! sometimes beat her simply because she envied her for being beautiful and delicate, and bright as a young primrose. "What a hag of a mamma it was to be cursed with, and what could the Madonna be thinking about to give such a *donnicciuola* of a mamma to his own *bellacuccia*! Not but what the Madonnina was sometimes inattentive, but then, of course, she had so many people to look after or she could not have given such a mamma to San Pietro as she did."

Here I saw a chance of changing the subject, and remarked that it would be nice to know what sort of a mamma the Madonna had given to San Pietro.

"Ah, well, sir, you must know that the mamma of San Pietro was the meanest woman that ever lived—scraping and saving all the days of her life, and keeping San Pietro and his two sisters (the nun and the other one, of whom I will tell you another time) for days together with nothing to eat except perhaps a few potato peelings and a cheese rind. As for acts of kindness and charity to her neighbours, I don't believe she knew what they were, though of course I am not certain; and whatever good San Pietro had in him he must have picked up somewhere else. As soon as he was old enough to work he became a fisherman, as you know, because when the Santissimo Salvatore wanted a Pope to govern the Church, He went down to the seaside and chose San Pietro, because He knew that as San Pietro was a fisherman he would be just the man to bear all kinds of hardships, and to catch
people's

people's souls and take them to Paradise, just as he had been used to catch fish and take them to the market. And so San Pietro went to Rome, and reigned there for many years. And at last the Pagans settled that all the Catholics had to be killed. And the Catholics thought that though they had no objection to being killed themselves it would be a pity to waste a good Pope like San Pietro, who had been chosen and given to them by the Lord God Himself. Therefore they persuaded San Pietro to run away on a night of the darkest, and to hide himself for a time in a lonely place outside the gates of the city. After he had gone a little way along the Via Appia—and the night was very dark—he saw a grey light on the road in front of him, and in the light there was the Santissimo Himself; and San Pietro was astonished, for His Majesty was walking towards Rome. And San Pietro said: 'O Master, where do you go?' And the Face of the Santissimo became very sad, and He said: 'I am going to Rome to be crucified again.' And then San Pietro knew it was not a noble thing that he was doing to run away on the sly like this, because a shepherd doesn't leave his sheep when wolves come—at least, no shepherd worth a *baiocco*.

"Then San Pietro turned round and went back himself to Rome, and was crucified with much joy between two posts in the Circus of Nero; but he would not be crucified like the Santissimo, because he wished to make amends for his weakness in trying to run away, and he begged and prayed to be crucified with his head where his feet ought to be. The Pagans said most certainly if he liked it that way, it was all the same to them. And so San Pietro made no more ado but simply went straight to Heaven. And, of course, when he got there his angel gave him a new cope and a tiara and his keys, and the Padre Eterno put him to look after the gate, which is a very great honour, but only his
due,

due, because he had been of such high rank when he lived in the world. Now after he had been there a little while his mamma also left the world, and was not allowed to come into Paradise, but because of her meanness she was sent to hell. San Pietro did not like this at all, and when some of the other saints chaffed him about it he used to grow angry. At last he went to the Padre Eterno, saying that it was by no means suitable that a man of his quality should be disgraced in this way ; and the Padre Eterno, Who is so good, so full of pity, and of mercy that He would do anything to oblige you if it is for the health of your soul, said He was sorry for San Pietro and He quite understood his position. He suggested that perhaps the case of San Pietro's mamma had been decided hurriedly, and He ordered her Angel Guardian to bring the book in which had been written down all the deeds of her life, good or bad.

“‘Now,’ said the Padre Eterno, ‘We will go carefully through this book and if We can find only one good deed that she has done We will add to that the merits of Our Son and of hers so that she may be delivered from eternal torments.’

“Then the Angel read out of the book, and it was found that in the whole of her life she had only done one good deed ; for a poor starving beggar-woman had once asked her, for the love of God, to give her some food, and she had thrown her the top of an onion which she was peeling for her own supper.

“And the Padre Eterno instructed the Angel Guardian of San Pietro's mamma to take that onion-top and to go and hold it over the pit of hell, so that if by chance she should boil up with the other damned souls to the top of that stew, she might grasp the onion-top and by it be dragged up to Heaven.

“The Angel did as he was commanded and hovered in the air over the pit of hell holding out the onion-top in his hand, and the furnace

furnace flamed, and the burning souls boiled and writhed like *pasta* in a copper pot, and presently San Pietro's mamma came up thrusting out her hands in anguish, and when she saw the onion-top she gripped it, for she was a very covetous woman, and the Angel began to rise into the air carrying her up towards Heaven.

"Now when the other damned souls saw that San Pietro's mamma was leaving them, they also desired to escape and they hung on to the skirts of her gown hoping to be delivered from their pain, and still the Angel rose, and San Pietro's mamma held the onion-top, and many tortured souls hung on to her skirts, and others to the feet of those, and again others on to them, and you would surely have thought that hell was going to be emptied straight away. And still the Angel rose higher and the long stream of people all hanging to the onion-top rose too, nor was the onion-top too weak to bear the strain. But when San Pietro's mamma became aware of what was going on and of the numbers who were escaping from hell along with her, she didn't like it: and, because she was a nasty selfish and cantankerous woman, she kicked and struggled, and took the onion-top in her teeth so that she might use her hands to beat off those who were hanging to her skirts. And she fought so violently that she bit through the onion-top, and tumbled back for always into hell flame.

"So you see, sir, that it is sure to be to your own advantage if you are kind to other people and let them have their own way so long as they don't interfere with you."

I chuckled at Toto's moral reflections.