



Figure 1 A French comic strip ‘Une cure merveilleuse’, c.1900, with a frog being pumped out of a man’s stomach. In the next panel the man is shown to have recovered.

century turned almost entirely against the possibility of the Bosom Serpent, and doctors writing in such periodicals as the *Lancet* proved a good deal less tolerant than journalists (Bondeson 1997, 33–43). Revealingly, correspondents to *Notes and Queries* debated the Bosom Serpent under the heading “Newspaper Folklore” (The first letter in a series: A Londoner 1852).

4. BURIED ALIVE

Summary: A living person in a trance is accidentally buried alive. Earliest Attestation: antiquity. Motif: S123: “Burial Alive.” Secondary Literature: Bondeson 2001. Compare with: “**Jolting the Coffin**” and the “**Lady and the Ring**.”

Being buried alive was, as Jan Bondeson (2001) has very capably shown, something of an obsession for Victorians. Living “corpses” appeared in factual news reports, in medical articles, in fiction, and even in art. A very small number of unlucky individuals *were* interred while still alive, but most reports came either from incorrect inferences made about noises from coffins (gasses released during decomposition) or from bodies that had later been found to have moved (again part of the process of decomposition) (Bondeson 2001, 244–45).

I have given, elsewhere in this volume, separate entries to two special urban legends about being buried alive: “**Jolting the Coffin**” and the “**Lady and the**

Ring. More typical “Buried Alive” stories break down into one of three types: survival, tardy discovery, or abandonment. The first involved, of course, “corpses” being rescued from their coffins. This is from 1856 and France:

A young married woman of Colluire, near this city, after being ill for some time, fell, one day last week, into a complete state of insensibility, and was supposed to be dead. A medical man who was called in gave a certificate of the death, and the young woman was laid out, and in due time fastened up in a coffin. In the night some women who were sitting up to watch the deceased heard subdued groans and sighs in the coffin. They fled in dismay, and the neighbours on hearing their account of the matter proposed to have the coffin opened, but the husband of the female would not hear of such a thing, as it would be, he said, a profanation of the dead. The mother of the young woman, however, broke open the coffin with a hatchet, and it then turned out that the young woman was not dead, but had only been in a lethargy. Medical assistance was procured for her, and in a short time she recovered perfect consciousness. She is now going on well. (“A Strange Story” Nov 1856; see also, for this type, “Nearly Buried Alive” 1889)

In other cases, a coffin or grave was re-opened, but too late to save the person who had been buried alive. Note that unaccountable delays and *premortem* lacerations, found in this passage from 1893, were common in such reports.

Information has been received at St. Petersburg of the burying alive of a peasant in the village of Maruten, in the government of Kalooga. The victim, who was shortly to be married, happened to fall asleep on a stove, the fumes from which partially asphyxiated him and rendered him unconscious. His relatives, thinking he was dead, had him buried without delay. Shortly after the funeral someone passing by the cemetery heard sounds proceeding from the newly made grave. When after considerable delay the grave was opened the victim was dead, the body presenting a horrible spectacle. The unfortunate man had torn his grave clothes and torn out one of his eyes and bitten off one of his fingers, while his face was literally in shreds. (“Buried Alive” 1893; see also, for this type, “A Major” 1892)

Sometimes the person in the coffin is found alive (just) but “expired very shortly afterwards” (“A Horrible Story” 1892).

Finally, there are stories about gravediggers or even family members ignoring clues that those who had been buried were alive. For instance, a Yorkshire sexton claimed, while drinking with friends, that he and his son had heard some noises from a pauper’s coffin but had filled the grave in anyway (“A Strange Story” Oct 1877; compare with the similar “A Horrible Story” 1892). A more



Figure 2 *Illustrated Police News* (21 May 1910), 4, 'Awful Discovery: A Girl Buried Alive.'

extreme version of this came again from Russia (along with France the main source of gruesome Buried-Alive stories for the British press). The year is 1890.

A rich popular farmer died somewhat suddenly in the village of Sooroffsky. He had been seen in the enjoyment of excellent health on Thursday, and was found dead in his bed on Friday morning. He was prayed for and duly “waked” after which he was carried to the grave, almost all the inhabitants of the village, inclusive of the priest, following him to the churchyard. Just as the body was being lowered the lid, which had been fastened rather loosely with wooden nails, began to rise up slowly and detach itself from the coffin, to the indescribable horror of the friends and mourners of the deceased. Then the dead man was seen in his white shroud stretching his arms upwards and sitting up. At this sight the gravediggers let go the chords, and along with the bystanders, fled in terror from the spot. The supposed corpse then arose, scrambled out of the grave, and, shivering from the cold (the mercury was two degrees below zero Farh.), made for the village as fast as his feebleness allowed him. But the villagers had barred and bolted themselves against the “wizard” and no one made answer to the appeals he made, with chattering teeth, to be admitted; and so, blue, breathless, trembling, he ran from hut to hut, seeking some escape from death. (“Superstition in Russia” 1890)