

Sofie PODLIPSKÁ

A View into Hell

*TRANSLATION BY TONY MILEMAN AND INTRODUCTORY
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The Czech author Sofie Podlipská (1833-1897) was the sister of the more famous literary figure Karolina Světlá (1830-1899). While not primarily a fantasist, Podlipská did share an interest in theosophy with many of her contemporaries.

The broader *fin de siècle* fashion of oriental mysticism so evident in Western Europe and the U.S. had fervent enthusiasts in Central Europe as well.¹ Bohemia itself was home to several spiritualist societies and specialized publishers of occult literature. Such interests were shared by many period scientists and scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, and they did not fall out of fashion until after World War II.

These currents are reflected in this story of involuntary trances ('magnetic sleep') from the author's posthumous collection *Pamět a smrt* (Memory and Death, 1903).² It tells of an older woman disturbed by clairvoyant visions of another world (or perhaps of our own world

reimagined), and the doctor who treats her. As such, it is an encounter between science and speculation at a time when the boundaries between them were more contested and more fluid than they later became.

The interaction between Podlipská's doctor and his patient anticipates that between the real-life Swiss clairvoyant Catherine-Elise Müller (pseud. Hélène Smith, 1861-1929), the daughter of a Hungarian merchant, and the Université de Genève professor of psychology Théodore Flournoy. This scholar concluded in a widely read study³ that the source of Müller's visions was her imagination. His patient felt a keen sense of betrayal by Flournoy and disavowed her collaboration with him. Podlipská died before the publication of Flournoy's study; and while she may not have known of Müller previously, her reference in the story to "a war in India" suggests visions of the subcontinent that Müller experienced as a reincarnated Indian

¹ Fekete 1996: 194. [Fekete, John. "Science Fiction in Hungary." *Science Fiction Studies* 16, no. 2 (July 1989): 191-200. <https://zh.booksc.eu/book/27021900/659d93> (Access 22 January 2022).]

² Originally published as "Vyhlička do pekla" in Sofie Podlipská, *Pamět a smrt a jiné novelly*, Praha: Unie, 1903: 157-171.

³ Flournoy, Théodore. *Des Indes à la planète Mars : étude sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalie*. 3rd ed. Genève: Georg, 1900. The work made Smith famous and led to an offer of employment from an American spiritualist (which she accepted). There have been numerous translations, including an initial one by Daniel B. Vermilye into English as *A Case of Somnambulism with Glossolalia* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900) and a recent retranslation by Sonu Shamdasani as *From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

princess. Regardless, Podlipská all but certainly knew of other contemporary spiritualists such as the Russian medium Vera Ivanovna Kryzhanovskaia (pseud. J. W. Rochester, 1861-1924) and the British theosophist Annie Besant (1847-1933).

In Podlipská's story, Dr. Freska appears first to be humoring his patient so that he might

understand the source of her illness, and then to conclude that any treatment must come from the same source as the visions themselves. His patient's visions then inspire him to return to a neglected love. This focus reflects early Czech science fiction and proto-science fiction's concern with human values rather than space-based adventure.

SOFIE PODLIPSKÁ

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“Another visitor? Who could it be? We are all here. I hope it is someone we know. Otherwise, that should spoil this delightful evening.”

So did the members of this small and intimate gathering in a congenial, brightly lit green drawing-room begin to chatter, whisper, and crane their necks towards the door when the bell rang outside.

Meanwhile, they heard someone come into the anteroom and exchange words with the housekeeper, who had taken his coat. It was a man’s voice. “Who can it be?” was written on each face. Yet one of the daughters of the family paled and then advanced towards the door.

She knew just who it was. It had been so long since he had last called on them that no one expected or counted on him to come again. No one could have guessed that it might be their dead friend, but she knew it was he, even with his voice indistinct.

God alone knew how her young heart was pounding, so hard that she could not even catch her breath.

Then the door opened, and the visitor entered. He was met by cries of joy and surprise.

Curtseying, Miss Leontina stepped back among all the others who had flocked to meet him, but he sought her out with his eyes and held his hand out to her.

This provoked her fresh indignation, bringing a fiery flush to her cheeks and a moist glow to her eyes.

“Dr. Freska!” the others cried out. “Where have you been? What have we done to offend

you to keep you away for so long? Why have you not paid us a visit? You are in good health, we hope.”

Leontina asked no questions, mute but for her eyes, and she put another step between them.

Yet Dr. Freska, though bowing cheerfully to all his interrogators and pressing everyone’s hand, directed a question of his own to Leontina: “What have you been doing since I last saw you so awfully long ago? Have you been happy and in good spirits?” He paused, and he clearly would have liked to ask, “Have you been thinking of me?”

Leontina whispered something with her eyes downcast. She gave the clear impression that Dr. Freska had been very much on her mind, and that his absence had distressed her – perhaps a little, perhaps very much.

Her younger sister Hedwig took the doctor’s hand, shook it impatiently, and said, “well then, do tell, why have you not come for so long?”

“I’ll be brief,” he replied, “I simply have not had the time. And if you are not occupied with anything else, reading, music, or some play, I will tell you at length, and I can entertain you with my story all evening.”

They all found the idea preferable to any other plans they had for the evening, and they took their places in a circle around the lamp.

Leontina glanced at him, and only then did she notice how distinctly pale and haggard the doctor was.

He continued, "In fact, I have been so fully occupied in both body and spirit that the entire world slipped my mind."

Leontina lowered her head and thought to herself, "Love does this to men." She did not notice how Dr. Freska had turned to her nor, at first, how she alone was the object of his explanations. She then forgave him fully and listened suspensefully to his account.

"One day, first thing in the morning, my servant came into my room. He stepped up to my bed and woke me from my sleep.

"Someone requests to speak to you,' he announced. It was still pitch dark. This was eight weeks ago, during Advent. 'What's the hurry,' I asked, 'why can't these people wait for visiting hours?'

"They have come by train and made their way straight here. They are from someplace called Kout, or something like that.'

"I had already started dressing. 'We are from the same region,' I said, 'Kout is a village near Domažlice. They all know me there, and they cannot help but think of coming to me. Who are they?'

"An old woman in peasant clothes, accompanied by a young fellow.'

"Tell them I'll be right there.' Soon I was ushering them into my surgery.

"The old woman was trembling all over. The young man introduced himself as her grandson and the one who had brought her to me. Her eyes were squinting, and she slumped heavily rather than sat down on the divan that we had both led her to.

"I did not even have time to inquire what was the matter with the patient, for young Master Svoboda, looking at her with trepidation, said, 'For God's sake, look, she's falling asleep again. This is how the trouble starts. Maybe I can still stop her from sleeping. I kept her awake all the

way here; that's why the poor thing is so worn out.'

"And why don't you want her to sleep?' I asked, as I brought out a bottle of smelling salts, which helped her become slightly more awake.

"It's just awful when she falls asleep, dear doctor. She has such convulsions that our village doctor can't do a thing for them. This has gone on for God knows how many years; the convulsions used to come only sometimes, but now they happen whenever my poor granny falls asleep. It's become unbearable! We're all sick to death of it. None of us has slept for God knows how many weeks. We've got to stay up with her all night long now.'

"There is nothing for it,' I said, 'but to let her sleep, I must see her in that state.' I called for an assistant, and on came the convulsions. I will not elaborate on them so as not to frighten you. I had never seen anything like it.

"Nevertheless, I managed to ease her convulsions sufficiently that Master Svoboda heartily declared me a miracle doctor. But I think the change of setting was also a contributing factor. Or it may be that the patient's condition had taken a new turn.

"Before long, about an hour later, my patient was dozing on the divan quite peacefully, whereas at home she would often be up all night twisting, tossing, and turning.

"I stood over her and observed her pale, gaunt, and wrinkled face. Her features were graceful, doubtless beautiful at one time. Her thick white hair cascaded down her temples to the nape of her neck.

"At first, her eyes were partly open and her breathing calm, but then a twitching grin began to play about her mouth, such as we see with a small child who is given to infantile spasms.

"Her expression grew ever more animated, her lips now in constant motion, and her breathing became more labored again.

“Master Svoboda clutched my arm. ‘Doctor,’ he whispered, ‘now she’s going to start talking. This is even more dreadful.’

“‘Have no fear,’ I comforted him, seeing his fright. ‘It is an illness, nothing more. Be brave. What is it like when she speaks?’

“‘She has only spoken about twice so far, but even if we did stay with her through it all, it was impossible to listen or to watch.’

“‘Then go and get some fresh air, my friend, and leave the patient to me. You may leave this distressing scene; I shall observe your granny myself. I have no need of you here, and I can see that you have full confidence in me.’

“The young man gratefully complied, and I had the sleeping woman brought into the next room, where no one could disturb us. I sent for the nurse in case I should be called away, but I did not intend to leave her without good reason.

“As she lay there on the divan, Miss Leontina, she began to speak. I hope you are not nervous or frightened. And as for you, my friend Melchior, I may tell you that this was the first time I had witnessed the so-called ‘magnetic’ sleep you don’t believe in.”

“And so the patient commenced to speak, but it was impossible to understand her. Her voice was constricted, and her pronunciation was slurred, as if she were inebriated. As she went on, her eyes suddenly opened, and she fixed them on a spot in front of her. She became ever more voluble. Then she raised her head, finally lifted herself up, and continued talking so fast that a froth developed around her mouth. She raised her hand and pointed a finger at where she was looking. I still could not understand a word she was saying, but I confess I was not without a certain horror at seeing her figure so unnaturally erect, and her entire posture, her

entire bearing, was such that she resembled an ancient Sibyl in every way.

“It was in fact quite a beautiful sight, even breathtaking, and I wished I could have the old woman painted in this paroxysm of hers. But she was a pitiful sight as she grew weak and her terrible convulsions left her.

“It took me longer to restore her to calm this time, and I was grateful to the nurse who so ably and conscientiously assisted me.

“I quickly made the rounds of my other patients and rushed home to my Sibyl. I decided to have her lodge with me until I could make sense of this strange case.

“After I discussed arrangements with young Master Svoboda, he left his granny in my care while he returned home for the time being. I anticipated that her treatment would be protracted, and I intended to remove her to the hospital if it proved necessary.

“But up to that point, I hardly expected this to become such a mysterious and interesting a case of magnetic sleep. I had developed no firm opinion as yet. After her last convulsions, the old woman slept for nearly twenty hours, and when she came to, it was a long while before she could understand what was happening to her.

“At last, she recalled how her grandson had brought her to Prague, and with tearful gratitude she thanked me for having taken such good care of her. She could not grasp why I had been keeping her in my own flat and attributed this to plain humanity. This won me boundless praise from her, and it was impossible to explain that her good opinion of me was only half deserved. In vain, I tried to convince her that I intended to make a study of her and to make some kind of discovery in her illness. To everything I said, she retorted ‘no, no, you must be the soul of kindness to keep me here. I know what a bother I am to my family at home.’

“I was obliged to endure her unwonted adoration, and I repaid her good opinion of me with genuine kindness.

“In time, I came to see the advantage of this circumstance as well.

“The poor woman was as fearful of falling asleep as her grandson had been.

“She had been telling me that, in her sleeping state, she was not aware of herself and yet she would develop a sense of vast and dark misery. Then when she woke, she would have a sense of hopelessness.

“I consoled her with reassurances and promised to ease her condition so that at least she would not be afraid of falling asleep.

“As evening came on, she fell into a slumber that presented the same manifestations as before. Yet I managed to restore her calm through my ministrations. I waited eagerly for her to begin to speak again. Once she did, I meant to test her ability to respond to questions. And so indeed I did, but she could not hear me.

“I sat down beside her and took her hands. This was immediately helpful. She took a deep breath and spoke distinctly for the first time:

“Ah, it is you, my benefactor. Stay here with me. I am on a journey, but if you take my hand, I shall not lose my way.’

“‘I will stay with you,’ I said, ‘provided you tell me where you are and what you are seeing.’

“‘I am in what they say was once a paradise, where the first people lived,’ she told me, and she then began to describe the landscape more vividly and more precisely than any travelogue I had ever read.

“Some moments later, she was observing other landscapes unlike any known to me from geography. The scenes she described were sometimes blissful, sometimes poignant or nightmarish. At one point, she enabled me to witness a war in India. All this was shimmering in in her mind like a Fata Morgana in the air.

“I could never have thought such wonders possible, and I know not how to explain it.

“I invited some colleagues to these scenes, but unfortunately my patient would never speak intelligibly in their presence, even when the nurse was there. I could never induce her to speak clearly unless we were alone. But when that was the case, she would become ever more communicative and more animated. I was beside myself with astonishment: for her language would take wing, become poetic, and she would often speak in verse.

“Then as time went on, she would have visions not only of the present but also of the past. She told me of things utterly unknown to any living soul, and I should have taken them for sheer inventions had not so much about them proven so remarkably accurate.

“At other times, she would narrate historical events that were familiar to me. I have kept a diary of all this, dear Leontina, and I will bring it to you whenever you like. You cannot wonder at my being so captivated by all this. Believe me when I tell you that I sometimes felt as if I had lost my mind. I would pass entire nights without sleeping; if I were not at my Sibyl’s side, I would become almost beside myself with concern. My thoughts were in a constant churn, spinning round and round in my mind.

“What unsuspected abilities lie dormant in the human spirit? What is this sixth sense that can perceive things distant or past, or perhaps of the future? Why does it manifest itself solely in the context of some pathological state?

“I have reached no conclusion on this, but I am certain that the future holds the answer to these riddles. For the time being, I can only relate what I have observed.”

“But the strangest thing of all still lay in store for me. Indeed, it plunged me into chaos.

“It was a gloomy day. The sky was so dreary that there was hardly any light. I woke up in the morning after a brief and fitful sleep. The first thing I did was to ask after the old woman. She was still fast asleep. Her seizures had persisted until midnight, and she began to sleep normally only about two hours afterward.

“I rushed to the city, where I went about my rounds in distraction. All my patients were on the road to recovery, all normal cases. The sounds of Christmas Eve could be heard in their homes. This was of no interest to me, and yet it is a day so dear to us since childhood that it stirs something in our hearts, something of joy and sorrow, of good fortune and bad, like bewitching sounds from the heavenly realm, so that we are involuntarily either uplifted or downcast. I too could not help but think several times that day, ‘tonight it shall be Christmas.’ And then these strange, recent experiences affected me all the more deeply.

“I returned home in the afternoon, and it was already dark again. I had taken lunch in a tavern away from the house. At home, the midday meal was long over. The old woman came to meet me in the vestibule. She had spotted me when I rang the bell. Helping me out of my coat, she asked whether I was tired. She was eager to be of help, so I asked her to brew me some tea.

“‘Am I ever going to get better?’ she asked as she poured it for me.

“The question startled me. It weighed on my conscience. While I had alleviated her suffering and been pondering it day and night, the truth is that I would have been less renowned for curing her than for a study of her illness. At the time, I might even have been sorry if it had all been broken off and left me unable to observe such a strange phenomenon.

“I told her I had hopes for her recovery, and she responded quickly and gratefully:

“‘Oh, I know, I know I’m in the best of hands!’

“I smiled distractedly, and she moved away and sat on a chair by the tiled woodstove.

“Immersed in my thoughts, I remained seated at the table. The lamp was flickering on my bureau by the window, where I had asked her to put it, thinking I would go sit there after finishing tea. The light at the tea-table was faint. Crimson sparks were shooting from the wood stove.

“Suddenly, the old woman stood up and advanced into the middle of the half-darkened room.

“I thought she was going to clear away the tea things, but she was asleep! She was untroubled by any convulsions at the time. Sleep had come over her while she was sitting by the stove, that unfathomable sleep in which she would experience her visions.

“There was no need for me to take her hand. Her speech was clearer than ever. Her voice was resonant.

“‘Come with me, come with me,’ she said, solemnly beckoning me. ‘I have been traveling far, to a place I had never been. My head is still reeling from the journey.’

“As she staggered, I shot up and caught her in my arms. I placed her on the divan and clutched her hand.

“She was trembling, her teeth chattering. I felt goosebumps on her hands.

“‘Such cold,’ she said, ‘such cold! Beyond even the cruelest frosts at home. What fun we have when it’s cold in our lands, how the children’s faces flush bright red, and how each of them scampers off to be at home by the hearth. Of course, we have some who lack hearths, the poor things. Unless they find shelter with good people, sadly, they are bound to perish. But here? They do not even have hearths at all. Don’t they know how to build fires? But how strange my

eyes are; I can simply look upon anything, and I understand the reasons behind it. There is no need to ask questions of anyone.

“This is how I was certain they knew, in that vale, how to build fires, but they were all quickly blown out. This happens because of the relentless wind that howls here day and night. It lasts all year round, and everything is constantly being toppled over. It is impossible to build here. Every hearth is immediately turned to rubble, unable to withstand the gale. The spreading flames then lay waste to the countryside until there is no food to be had.

“Yet I can see shapes. Are they people? They are crawling about on all fours. Sometimes they manage to build shelters, but otherwise they dwell in pits. What kind of existence is this? But perhaps they can at least keep themselves safe there.

“The poor wretches, doomed to eternal darkness! They may all be blind. I am able to see here, since I use my inner vision, but what darkness! My God! It is never this dark at home. There is always some flicker of light. There is nothing here, nothing! Where has the light of heaven gone that it never breaks through here? Nor is there even the dawn that comes after so many months to the polar regions I’ve traveled.

“No, no, there is no dawn here. But even in such darkness, the people there can make everything out, perhaps by touch, who can say. Of course, that must be it. We have blind people too, and how capable they are. But here, absolutely everyone is blind, and no sighted person guides their steps.

“Oh, horror! What is that rumbling? It is water. Such ghastly water, dark, unseen, raging, and violent. Everything is deluged! That was a shelter for the people who live here.

“Oh, what horror! Such horror! They are fighting for their lives, but it is no good. Death consumes them. The wretched corpses are

floating away, off to somewhere in the eternally restless seas.

“A few of the unfortunate creatures have escaped. With their eyes capable of seeing in the dark, they keep a lookout for much that is in their environment.

“And I can see all of it, I can see how every so often the floodwaters rise, and each time they lay waste to everything, and it is impossible to live in the highlands given the storms and the winds, given the cold and the great adversity.

“However, there is no way to guard against the floods, no protection, and nowhere to take refuge. Survival is ultimately a matter of chance. And yet they are alive here. Strangely enough, they shall not lose their zest for life. Even after every disaster, so very many children are born. The poor babes! As darling as young ones anywhere.

“But it is impossible to see to all the children; since there are so many of them, they cannot feed them all, and look now, here they go dying again in droves.

“God only knows how all this life has held on at all, this progeny of a miserable generation of beings. Look, new children have been born, and although some will thrive, how many more of them shall perish. We have no experience of this where I come from.

“See there! The horror, the horror! An earthquake. Everything has been laid waste all over again. The naked who were not crushed and wiped out have been forced to cover many miles in search of some new patch of land that can barely sustain them. My God! To make such a quest in that never-ending wind!

“Forming a long caravan, they make their way. Look, they can see a valley in the depths of the darkness. It seems well hidden from the wind, and the dark maw of the cave greets them like some promised land. Joyful, they hurry toward it.

“And once there, alas! A volcanic fissure has opened up, spewing out lava and wiping the wretches out as it erupts.

“Suddenly a light, terrifying and blinding, bursts forth in the sky. Dear God, have mercy! This must be hell. I must go, I cannot bear to remain here.

“But these poor wretches must hold on somehow,’ a voice says to me, I know not whence.

“So they must, and indeed several have escaped this catastrophe. They pour into the valley, but it has been buried in ash. And they must wander, wander without end.

“I can’t see them anymore, where have they gone?

“Oh, that I could find my way home. Am I damned? Has eternal justice cast me forever down to hell?’

“At this point, my poor clairvoyant began to scream and thrash so violently that I could not remain a mere observer. I was so overcome with pity that tears fell from my eyes.

“With all of my will, I took both her hands in mine and cried out, ‘tell me what it is that will cure you! Think on it, I implore you. There can and must be some answer that you yourself know.’

“My voice restored her to calm. She ceased to tremble and replied in a faint voice, ‘Yes, I will think on an answer. Thank you for urging me on to this. But just one moment. There is something keeping me here. I realize that I am not in hell. I am told this is a part of our world, nothing more; although where it is, God knows. It is a part of creation where disasters are the rule, where one prospers only by chance and by exception. God continually breathes new life into this desolation so that Death not reign supreme.

“Consider the sheer wonder, the miracle of it. These beings neither despair nor curse their

fate. If you could but see their perseverance. Look, they’re having a feast. Here in their pits, they are singing hymns of praise that they are still alive.

“They rejoice when a child is born to them, and they never lament, never curse, even in the greatest distress. Each faces death so boldly that it holds no dread. While taking leave of the dead brings them sorrow, they believe that the dead are brought back to life in other living things. They support one another in true brotherhood and find recompense for disasters and calamities in everlasting kindness toward each other. There are no wars, no quarrels, no judgments.

“‘The light of love shines in the darkness of their fate.’

“The old woman straightened up suddenly and then fell backwards so violently that I thought she was done for. I caught her in my arms, and when I saw that she was still breathing, I once again loudly bid her tell me what would cure her. Holding her firmly, I gripped her with all my might.

“Then she spoke in a weary voice: ‘Say...say this: “Human Spirit, keep within your bounds!” Say it three times!’

“I obeyed, but as I said it for the third time, I could barely speak the words. It proved so very difficult, and I had a feeling that no one had the right to order a human spirit about in such a way. After all, nature herself sweeps away boundary stones and snatches us up into unknown currents. And yet I managed it. I am a doctor, and it is my duty to bring relief to the suffering.”

“Oh, had I been in her place!” Leontina exclaimed, “I would not have asked to be cured.”

Dr. Freska continued: “No sooner had I said these words than my clairvoyant went to sleep as quietly and soundly as a child.

“I stayed at her side for some time, leaning over her, and then it occurred to me that it was

Christmas Eve. And her words came back to me: 'The light of love shines in the darkness of their fate.'

"Then I comforted myself with the thought that I had forbidden this human spirit to wander further.

"After all, there is no solution to the secrets of life and eternity but love everlasting. I sat down and fell asleep, greatly fatigued. When I awoke, I saw a light in the room.

"It was coming from the opposite window, where a Christmas tree was lit and the children were scampering around it.

"My clairvoyant remained asleep, and I wondered where her mind had been visiting, in what far reaches of the world, and whether she had looked in on some other planet.

"What a dark vista she had opened for me!

"But love, love!

"I was thinking of love."

"The old woman had been genuinely cured. I know how improbable all this seems. I myself believe that in time it may feel like a dream, and outside of this dear circle I know not whether I will dare speak of it, lest I should be thought a charlatan.

"I accompanied my clairvoyant to the train station this morning. Thanking me sincerely, she went off to the waiting room, small, stooped, simple, and uneducated."

When Dr. Freska had finished speaking, the silence was so profound that the buzzing of a fly could be heard, but then a lively and spirited conversation erupted.

He drew near to Leontina and whispered something in her ear, took her hand, and she nodded to him. They had so much to say to each other that Dr. Freska was unable to give answer to the many and curious questions from the rest of the gathering.