

LADISLAV VELINSKÝ

THE END OF DR. SNOBINS’ IMMORTALITY

Translation, introduction and notes by Carleton Bulkin

In the realm of Czech speculative fiction, Ladislav Velinský represents the many “loners” who turned out most of the genre’s early works. Recent exchanges among Czech bloggers indicate that Velinský may have been born in 1885 in Holice, a town in eastern Bohemia’s Pardubice region,¹ his father František a pensions administrator. Ladislav completed his vocational-college training in chemical engineering in 1906. Two years later, he married Marie Heide (d. 1969) in Litol (Lyše nad Labem). Velinský is known to have worked as the director of an ersatz-coffee factory in the Prague suburb of Kolín.

His sole foray into literature was a collection of seven short stories under the title *Bizarní novely* (Bizarre Novellas, 1912).² Its publisher was Marie Kliková, who printed a small number of copies from her operation in the Prague suburb of Kolín. The book generated scant critical notice. As Czech science-fiction scholar Ivan Adamovič suggests, the word “bizarre” in

the title reflects the speculative nature of six of the stories, as well as the lack of any established term for the genre as yet in Czech. Nevertheless, “Dr. Snobins” has become a favorite of Czech science-fiction readers.

As for the other stories in this collection, they envision a Utopia where mechanization liberates workers from toil, and free love is the rule; the invention of an “orthopter” (a flying machine) powered by human will; and an advanced telegraphy machine that strengthens the astral body. In these tales, human ambition is often humbled by nature.

Such speculations on social, technological, and moral topics can be found in the musings of many other European writers (and would-be writers). In an earlier work, *Příspěvek k řešení otázky o myšlení člověka* (A Contribution to the Question of Human Thought, 1906), he put forth several unconventional ideas, such as positing “vital electricity” (*životní elektřina*) as the force behind “the soul” and telepathy, and

¹ Rampas, Zdeněk. E-mail correspondence, Rampas-Bulkin 28 January 2023. According to these findings, Velinský died in 1956. When the Czech-language publisher of an anthology including a short story by the author investigated possible copyright claims with the responsible state agency, they found none.

² The following translation is based on this edition: “Konec nesmrtnosti doktora Snobinse,” from *Bizarní novely* (Bizarre Novellas). Praha-Kolín: Marie Kliková, 1912.

dismissing marriage as legalized serial coitus. The author published a few other non-literary books on subjects including the sugar industry, photography, optics, and cremation (!)³ However offbeat much of this sounds today, Velinský clearly had an inventive mind and aspired to be a sort of Renaissance man.

As the Czech bloggers tentatively found, Velinský worked at the munitions factory of his brother Jaroslav (d. August 1945) in Jablůnka u Vsetína during World War II. The factory was shelled by retreating German forces. This and his wife Marie are buried in Prague's Vinohrady Cemetery.⁴

³ Adamovič, Ivan. *Vládcovi vesmíru*. Praha: Plus, 2010: 63-64; and *Slovník české literární fantastiky a science fiction*. Praha: R3, 1995: 238.

⁴ Rampas, *Ibid.*

THE END OF DR. SNOBINS' IMMORTALITY

The story I'm about to tell happened in Chicago years ago. I don't remember what business brought me there, but I'm sure it couldn't have been of any great importance. I spent most of my time at various arcades and bars. The bars in the poorer neighborhoods are remarkably individual in character and interesting for their customers. A given neighborhood's bars and patrons alike are types completely unlike those in any other place. What's more, every bar is frequented by a more-or-less figure or two that all regulars typically poke fun at.

At the time of my story, there was a bitter freeze. Heavy snow, hard as hail, was blowing in the streets, pelting the faces of those on foot so hard they couldn't stand it, their faces blue from the frost. No one was out on the street if he could help it; anyone driven outdoors by his job, or an itch for fun, bundled himself up in his winter coat and made straight for his destination. I'd been at a coffee shop all afternoon, playing whist with a few people I knew. When we had our fill of cards, we all decided to head home. We paid our tab, put on our toasty fur coats, and went outside, gabbing away.

It was already getting on toward five in the afternoon, the streetlights had come on, and the snow clouds were hanging like heavy plush curtains in the sky. The cold outside soon put the skids on our conversation and laughter. We gave up talking, since it hurt to say anything, and our lips were freezing. We'd been walking for about a quarter-hour (we all happened to be

going the same way, since we lived in the same neighborhood), when one of the fellows came to a stop at the door of a little bar with a big golden rooster painted on the sign. "Boys," he said, "it's warm in here. Let's go inside. We'll get home tonight all the same."

It was cold outside, and no one was waiting for us at home, since we were all bachelors, so it didn't take much persuasion. In we went. The bar was nice and cozy, with a potbellied stove at the middle of the longer wall that wasn't just radiating but blasting heat into the room. The room itself was low-slung, vaulted, and shaped like a tunnel. The walls had a coat of oil paint on them, probably so they'd be easier to clean; but over time, the paint's original purpose had been forgotten. There were several tables, all without tablecloths; no two of the chairs matched. Several cheap color prints were hung on the walls, representing (as far as we could tell in the dull light of the two weak bulbs, covered in dust) various scenes from the war between the North and the South. An old piano and an equally old clock completed the bar's appurtenances. The clock didn't even run, and the piano was probably in the same condition. It was missing a leg, and the resourceful barkeep's solution was to prop it up with an empty beer keg.

I like bars like this better than the fanciest of hotels. In a fancy room, I always feel sort of downcast; my laughter doesn't sound genuine, and my words don't say what my heart feels and wants to say. It's like a fancy room expects you

to use choice words, nice smooth talk, and keep the laughs from getting too loud.

Inside the warm barroom, our mouths lost their chill, and a lively party was soon in full swing. The barkeep, a fat guy with blue eyes red from never getting enough sleep, quickly took our orders. We treated ourselves to all the brandy and ale we felt like. Stuffing our short pipes with fine-smelling cigarette tobacco, all puffed until the room was filled with smoke. It might have been hard to make us out, but there was no getting round the sound of us. Every now and then, there'd be some outburst of noisy laughter from our table, often so loud that the barkeep would turn a worried eye at the windowpanes as they rattled.

The place was gradually filling up. The neighborhood's small tradesmen had come in after busting their humps all day long to have themselves a glass of ale or brandy. With callused hands, they'd bring their glasses down on the table with a big thump. They'd enjoy a rousing game of cards. It was some betting game that involved two decks of cards.⁵ They were all smoking like chimneys on their small wooden pipes. Blue-collar workmen shucking off their light overcoats would come inside with cigarettes in their chattering teeth. They sat down quick, drank quick, and talked up a storm about the day's work, their wages, and girls. They'd back up their words with quick, nervous movements, and if they needed to emphasize something, they'd slam their fists down on the table so hard sometimes that the glasses would bounce and rattle even if they were full. They'd make a lot of noise ordering their meager suppers from the barkeep and eat the same way, munching away and not looking around at each other. Spending time at the

bar was a real pleasure for us. We'd watch the various people there, enjoying their good mood and guessing from their faces and the way they acted what they did for a living.

It was already nine o'clock when a new customer came in. He sauntered into the room with a steady, leisurely step, looked round the tables, and, observing an empty place at ours, came our way. He was a peculiar character. Perched on a lanky, gangly body was a square-shaped head, the brown eyes glinting with a peculiar, artificial kind of luster. The face was healthy in complexion, almost distractingly so. But the odd thing was that this customer had a full head of snow-white hair, while under his nose was a black mustache trimmed in the English style. He was dressed very lightly, that's to say, in what looked like summer clothes. He had no overcoat, and though he'd just come in from the bitter cold, he showed no ill effects from it. The other bar customers must have known exactly who he was, since his appearance didn't raise an eyebrow. All that happened was that someone elbowed his neighbor somewhere and said tersely: "Look who's here, the centenarian!"

With the same jaunty step as he had come in with, the newcomer approached our table, said a curt "by your leave," and without waiting for an answer, calmly sat down.⁶ He nodded to the barkeep and exchanged some strange signals with him using the fingers of his right hand, after which the other man brought him two bottles of ale. The newcomer poured himself a glass and downed it in one gulp. He had all of us interested. What most caught our eye were that white hair and raven-black beard. We all supposed (as we later agreed) that the old gent must dye his mustache. For what reason, we

⁵ Possibly pinochle or some variant of it.

⁶ The general custom at Czech pubs is to share tables, though it is good form to ask permission.

couldn't guess, since why would he dye only his beard and not his hair as well?

This intriguing visitor noticed our searching glances, drank deeply (he'd now finished off both bottles), exchanged some more strange signals with the barkeep, and then addressed us: "Gentlemen,⁷ you must be wondering why my hair is white and my beard still the youthful color of a raven's plumage. It is merely an accidental consequence of my not commencing sooner with my macrobiotic technique. But ho, I mustn't forget to introduce myself, sirs. I am Dr. Snobins, sirs, Snobins."

We all rose, gave our names, and shook hands with the enigmatic doctor. He shook our hands with a strange verve. The physical contact wasn't exactly pleasant. It felt like touching an unusually thick, coarse, rigid epidermis.

The white-haired doctor sat down, took out a small pipe, and mechanically reached for my tobacco pouch nearby on the table. He filled his pipe, lit it, and along with the first plumes of smoke spouted the following question: "How old do you suppose I am, 'gentlemen?'"

We looked at him in appraisal, and each then pronounced his verdict. One friend said he looked eighty years old; another swore he couldn't be more than seventy, and I even said something around sixty. He gave me a scornful look and said: "'Gentlemen,' this very day I am turning one hundred and fifty years old."

We looked at him and then at each other, our astonished eyes conveying misgivings as to what the old gent said. As for him, he remained calmly seated at the table, swaddled in clouds of smoke, his unnaturally lustrous eyes feasting on our perplexity. He took a deep swig and continued, "'gentlemen,' you think I'm pulling

the wool over your eyes. No indeed, I truly am a hundred and fifty years old today. This would surely not surprise you if you knew of my theory, which I have tested on myself to practical effect. Nor would you be at all surprised were I to tell you I shall live forever."

We looked at each other, then at him, then back at each other thinking, "is he crazy?"

Dr. Snobins gave us a withering look and wryly observed, "you seem to doubt my sanity, 'gentlemen.' I assure you, my mind is quite sane, as much so as any of yours."

Silently, we snorted at this assertion. Meanwhile the old gent's pipe had gone out. He emptied it without a word, helped himself once again from my pouch, and having lit up, resumed in due course, "well, 'gentlemen,' lest you think you have a madman on your hands, I shall divulge my theory to you. I became a doctor at a European university. My parents came from England. They spared no expense for my studies and my experiments. Even as a young doctor, I distinguished myself with some remarkable work in the field of bacteriology, a science that was in fact unknown at the time. It was a field that in fact, I myself discovered and was the first to cultivate. But as so often happens, my first works met with an unfavorable reception from my envious colleagues. So after this initial disappointment, I decided to continue my work and studies but to publish nothing, so that today no one knows, nor did any of you when I first took this seat, that they are face to face with the actual Dr. Snobins, the father of bacteriology."

As he uttered these last few words, Dr. Snobins' voice thickened (perhaps from emotion). He took a long drink and then

⁷ Velinský uses the English "gentlemen" here. It was fashionable in fin-de-siècle Czech to use foreign words, and English aristocratic polish was then also widely admired in continental Europe; yet the word is highfalutin in this setting. On the whole, Snobins' language is mannered. His surname contains the English word "snob," which Czech readers would have recognized.

resumed in his former tone, “I have discovered the bacilli of every disease and correctly ascertained their harmful effects on the human organism. For I have found that as bacilli metabolize, they produce certain poisonous substances that I have designated ‘toxins.’ In experiments with animals whose veins I injected with bacillary cultures, I achieved a startling result. The creature would become ill with the disease normally induced by the injected bacillus, but the disease was less virulent, and the animal eventually recovered. When I reinjected the animal with a culture of the same bacterium, the animal did not contract the disease again. On examining the blood of a healthy animal and the affected one, I finally concluded that the affected one’s blood could resist the toxin’s effects by creating another poison that specifically counteracted it, for which reason I termed it an ‘antitoxin.’

“Well, ‘gentlemen,’ perhaps now you understand the formulation of my macrobiotic theory. Nothing could be simpler” (here the old gent broke off and drained his glass of ale in the interim) “than to inject an organism with the bacillary cultures of every possible disease one by one; the organism shall always contract a mild form of the disease, soon recover, and thus become immune for life. Well, ‘gentlemen,’ I have performed these experiments upon myself. I have artificially induced every possible disease in myself and can now boast that I could feed on pure cultures of bacilli without so much as the slightest indigestion.

“As soon as I knew I was on the right track, I began to consider other ailments and mishaps in life that could lead to death. In so doing, I have found, for instance, that if one ingests a small quantity of arsenic and increases that quantity daily, that arsenic ceases to be a poison

to the body. On this point, I have achieved some success, so that today I can consume a good two decagrams of arsenic after lunch. In like manner, I have ingested every conceivable poison and gradually increased the quantity. And believe me, sirs, that were it necessary for me to take phosphorus and calcium today,⁸ I could consume them unadulterated and with gusto.

“Likewise with alcohol and nicotine. I would gladly demonstrate for you gentlemen what quantities of these two poisons my organism can tolerate, but regrettably my pecuniary resources are not so sterling as to permit anything of the sort.” With that, Dr. Snobins’ voice seemed to thicken again. This doctor and his macrobiotic theory had gotten us interested. As we were curious, and since our wallets were stuffed to bursting, we tactfully invited the immortal doctor to be our guest, making it clear that our wallets’ contents were at his disposal. This intriguing old man, with his white hair and raven beard, seemed only too pleased at the opportunity to show us, at least in one regard, the practicability and soundness of his theory, or at least so we thought as we heard the faint snap of his fingers... He turned to the barkeep and gave him signals like his earlier ones, only more extravagant. And in short order, the barkeep brought ten bottles of ale and set them out before him, along with a carton of fine tobacco.

The old man fortified himself by emptying two bottles and went on: “Sirs, just as with alcohol, nicotine, arsenic, cocaine, morphine, and other poisons, I have habituated myself to the viper’s venom, and I am completely immune to this creature’s bite. And since better safe than sorry, I once let a rattlesnake bite me when a traveling menagerie had a stopover here. Never

⁸ Sic “calcium” (Czech vápník). Certain calcium compounds such as calcium oxide and calcium chloride are poisonous.

yet have I been out on the open prairie, and I hardly think I ever shall; but as I say, one can never be too cautious when it comes to one's health.

"Well, sirs, that is how I became immune to disease and poisons; so that changes of temperature should never harm me, I have bathed in salt solutions cooled down to minus ten degrees Celsius; straight from this bath, I would immerse myself in heat and then in a cold draft. I have so inured myself that neither heat nor cold has little effect on me, that summer or winter, I can go about completely naked. Since the police would not allow this, I must wear these light clothes.

"Yet even as I continued my research and work, I remained unsatisfied. After long labors that ultimately exhausted my family inheritance, I have invented an antitoxin that directly prevents aging. You smile, 'gentlemen,' thinking yourselves presented with a charlatan who shall end up offering you some worthless tonic for a pretty penny. Nothing of the sort, sirs, the secret of my antitoxin against aging shall remain locked within me, never to be disclosed to ungrateful mankind. My only error was in inventing the antitoxin against aging too late, when my hair was as white as the snow now flying through the streets of Chicago."

The old gent paused to finish off the last bottle of ale. With a signal from the fingers of his right hand, he ordered a fresh supply of beer and tobacco from the barkeep and resumed his explanations. Meanwhile the bar was emptying out. The workers had mostly left, with only one table of tireless artisans at a card game. Slips of paper were rustling, coins rattling, glasses clinking, and a player would occasionally let fly with a thump on the table or a quiet laugh, depending on how the wheel of fortune was turning. The barkeep, by now clearly tired and sleepy, was squinting with his reddened blue

eyes and casting long, sweeping glances over the room.

The old doctor emptied yet another bottle of ale and returned to his interesting theory. "I shall explain, sirs, how I came up with the idea to produce an antitoxin against aging. As a physician I was often summoned to a patient's bedside, and there I made liberal use of bloodletting. I must tell you, sirs, that I considered this a dubious practice and often used it only to collect blood from people of various ages. On examining the blood, I found there (besides the particular toxin of the bacteria that brought on the illness) a peculiar toxin I had never before encountered in the bacteria of any ailment. I soon noticed that this toxin existed in older persons in greater quantities. Thus does the old-age toxin build up in the course of a lifetime until, at the end, there is so much of it that it brings all metabolism to a complete stop and the organism starts to die. I injected the blood of an old man dying of marasmus into a rabbit, and lo and behold, it fell ill with all the symptoms of the disease. The rabbit was sick for about ten days, after which its blood had produced sufficient antitoxin to counteract the effect of the injected toxin. I isolated this antitoxin, sirs, and have injected it into my own veins. The method for isolating it shall forever remain my secret."

At this point in his speech, the old gent paused to fill his pipe, which had gone out. The barkeep was shuffling impatiently about and looking at the hands of the clock, which always stood pointed to the same time. The card players at the next table were as they kept raising their bets in a fever. The cards made a horrible scraping sound as they slid over the table's smooth surface, the talk and the taunting grew louder and louder, the empty glasses were slammed more and more violently on the table.

The old gent took no notice of the ruckus behind him and calmly went on:

“Sirs, the antitoxin I have invented has one great defect. It counteracts the toxin for a certain period. After that, the body’s metabolism resumes the bloodborne production of the toxin, which on reaching a certain quantitative level must be reneutralized with a fresh injection of antitoxin. I must therefore monitor my blood constantly. To this end, I employ a special hollow corkscrew and keep a close watch on it lest I miss the opportune moment for an antitoxin injection. You may wonder, sirs, why I should need a corkscrew to get through my skin to an artery, but you mustn’t forget that I am already a hundred and fifty years old.”

We looked on at him, filled with astonishment and amazement. In our silent regard, we never even noticed that the argument at the card-players’ table had turned into a brawl. One of the players was palming

cards. After some verbal reproaches, the players turned to their fists, and when their fists no longer seemed apropos as a weapon, they picked up their glasses, which are made extraordinarily heavy by local industry. One glass, unfortunately, slipped from a player’s hand. Instead of landing on the card sharper’s head, it hit that of the hundred-and-fifty-year-old doctor, smashing it; and this happened just as the doctor was raising a glass of ale to his mouth. Red blood stained the floor and the table sans tablecloth. Such a possibility had never occurred to the silver-haired doctor, nor had he ever in his life sought an antitoxin against any such thing.

After the arrival of the examining physician and the policeman (whom the barkeep had called immediately), we were questioned. Then we paid the unfortunate doctor’s tab. It came to a total of twenty dollars.⁹ By the time we left for home, the snow had ceased falling.

⁹ As a rough estimate based on inflation, \$20 in 1912 dollars would be worth \$540-600 in 2023.