Dag Hedman, »Playing with Esotericism. Frank Heller’s Novel Andarna och Furustolpe (The Spirits and Furustolpe) and His Short Stories on Séances«

**ABSTRACT**

Frank Heller (pen name of Ph.D. Gunnar Serner, 1886–1947) published suspense fiction from 1913 to 1947, mostly adventure stories, but also some in the crime genre and some science fiction. He had a keen eye for the potential of esotericism in connection with this kind of story. His first and foremost endeavour into this field is the »from-rags-to-riches« novel Andarna och Furustolpe (1920), written in Venice (the author was evading the Swedish police since 1912, due to several successful bank frauds involving forged signatures of wealthy patrons). In Andarna och Furustolpe the war-profiteer Wenzel Furustolpe learns how to manoeuvre successfully in business by the deceased skipper Teelemainen, who communicates with him through different devices. In his esoteric short stories, like »Hades’ renässans« (1930) and »Spökguldet« (1932), Heller typically exploits séances, which are invariably fakes, and during which the point is to steal jewels or other valuable objects in the darkness of the room, or to hide messages or objects.

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**Keywords:** Frank Heller, Gunnar Serner, esotericism in Swedish literature, parodies of esotericism.

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**PLAYING WITH ESOTERICISM. Frank Heller's Novel Andarna och Furustolpe (The Spirits and Furustolpe) and His Short Stories on Séances**

Gunnar Serner/Frank Heller in Kalundborg, Denmark in 1918.

Frank Heller (pen name of Ph.D. Gunnar Serner, 1886–1947) published suspense fiction from 1913 to 1947, mostly adventure stories, but also some in the crime genre and some science fiction. He had a keen eye for the potential of esotericism in connection with this kind of story.
His first and foremost endeavour into this field was his seventh novel, *Andarna och Furustolpe*, published in Stockholm in 1920 by Dahlbergs Förlagsaktiebolag.¹ The novel was written in Venice (the author was evading the Swedish police since 1912, due to several successful bank frauds involving forged signatures of wealthy patrons), and is set from April 1916 to August 1917.

In the first scene of *Andarna och Furustolpe* the Finnish Swede Wenzel Furustolpe and the Finnish skipper Teelemainen drink heavily at night in the cabin of Teelemainen’s ship.² Teelemainen is smuggling Furustolpe from Finland (at that time a part of the Russian Empire) to Sweden. A storm is raging. The two men have a fight, ending in Furustolpe striking Teelemainen’s head with a bottle, Teelemainen chasing Furustolpe with a knife in his hand, and the skipper falling over board and drowning when the ship heels over. His death at the age of 40 had been foretold by the Paavila crone (Paavilakäringen; pp. 15, 23).

Eventually, Furustolpe surfaces in Copenhagen, where he becomes a war-profeteer. After a time, greed makes him want to earn faster money than he can do legally. He now enters into a scheme for smuggling platinum from Denmark to Sweden. One day, just like in the Biblical text about Belshazzar, he finds a written message on the wall: »Hahaha: Wenzel Furustolpe.« (pp. 86, 90) A short time later, Furustolpe awakens by the telephone ringing. At first, he can only hear a clicking sound in the receiver, but then a faint, wheezy voice can be discerned, like from a person drowning, speaking in Finnish Swedish, and repeating: »Furustolpe! Furustolpe!« (pp. 92 f) At last the voice mockingly whispers: »Furustolpe! Watch out! The business will fail! Hohoho —« When he phones the telephone company to find out, to whom he has been speaking, the reply is: »No-one has called your number.« (pp. 95 f) Furustolpe is frantic. He tries to call off the smuggling, but his man is apprehended by the Danish Police – though not with platinum, but a load of condoms! (p. 117).

Furustolpe gets in contact with a medium, herr Wendland, and participates in a séance, where the voices of Socrates and the Huron Red Indian Red Heart materialize. After a while, Teelemainen’s spirit interrupts the séance, which ends in confusion (pp. 175 f). Furustolpe and herr Wendland now have a lengthy conversation about esoteric and occult practices (pp. 176–189).

At the next session, Teelemainen is belligerent, but ends in repenting and promising not to persecute Furustolpe anymore if he pledges repentance too (pp. 192–195). Another session shows that Teelemainen has left the sphere of herr
Wendland’s control spirit, probably as a reward for repenting his persecution of Furustolpe (pp. 203 ff). Later, the protagonist uses herr Wendland to contact the spirits for guidance when operating on the Stock Market (pp. 227–237), with catastrophic consequences, not due to the advice from the spirits, but to Furustolpe’s interpretation of them. Wenzel Furustolpe is practically ruined, when he himself becomes a medium, and starts writing messages and cheques in the handwriting of a rich young man, Hjalmar Gyllenklost. He forges other signatures as well, and in the end he is forced to flee. With Telemäinen’s drowning from his ship at night in the first scene of the novel, when Furustolpe was escaping from Finland to Sweden, it is only logical that the protagonist drowns while embarking at night on a ship that would let him escape to Great Britain. Instead of crossing the waves of the North Sea, the war-profiteer crosses the waves of Styx.

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Frank Heller: Andarna och Furustolpe (The Spirits and Furustolpe; Stockholm, 1920)

——Frank Heller may have been inspired by authors like Julius Magnussen (1882–1940), Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), and Sir Oliver Lodge (1851–1940) when writing Andarna och Furustolpe. In a letter to his Swedish publisher Olof Dahlberg (1888–1956), dated «Monte Carlo 8–8–[19]20», Heller expressly referred to Julius Magnussen’s newly published Guds Smil (1920; The Smile of God), published in Swedish in the same year. Magnussen’s text is definitely interesting, since it largely
focuses on automatic writing, and thus is a probable inspiration for the abovementioned parts of *Andarna och Furustolpe* in which Wenzel Furustolpe writes messages and cheques in the handwriting of Hjalmar Gyllenkvist (it is never really clear if Furustolpe actually believes himself to be a medium or if he is a cold blooded forgerer).

In a postcard, poststamped in Bozen 11–9–1920, Heller thanked Dahlberg for sending »*Lodge*, probably *Raymond or Life and Death* (1916), in which Lodge describes contacts through mediums with his son, who had been killed in the First World War.

Furustolpe was sitting in room 217. An English spiritist book in translation lay open in front of him. [...] The book [...] was written by a father, who had lost his son in the War. Shortly after his death, he began receiving messages from his son. There was no doubt about the authenticity of the messages. Through information about things, which were completely unknown to the father, like photographs taken at the front, the son had completely verified his identity through different mediums. In message after message he described his life on the other side; his emotions, when he woke up; his astonishment in finding a firm, solid universe surrounding him instead of a shadow world or a heaven; his meeting with friends of his father.

The quoted passage might also be inspired by Doyle’s *The Vital Message* (1919). Doyle had also lost his son in WW1, and just like Lodge, he had contacted him through mediums. Another author that is mentioned in *Andarna och Furustolpe* is Frederic William Henry Myers (1843–1901). In all probability Heller is referring to *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (posthumously published in 1903). Heller quotes a passage in Myers, where he tells about a person who is wafted by spirits through a third-storey window and in again through another. Myers’s witnesses (six persons, of which three were scientists) are also mentioned (p. 180).

Heller also mentions »*Podger’s The Other Side*« (»*Podgers Den andra sidan*«; pp. 179 f, 183). It is not clear, to whom he is referring, and to which book, but one possibility is, that this is a printing error for Rodgers, in which case the famous theosophist Louis William Rodgers (1859–1953) would be a likely candidate. Another possibility would be Frederic William Henry Myers’ collaborator Frank Podmore (1856–1910), which would mean another printing error. However, it is possible, that Podgers is in fact not a misprinting, but Heller’s fusion of »*Podmore*« and »*Rodgers*«, simply hinting at any esoteric writer, and thus making it difficult to be specific about sources. Rodgers published at least four works with titles that seem
close to the subjects Heller mentions, and Podmore seven. None of them have titles even remotely similar to *The Other Side*.

Heller quotes Podgers about the material powers of spirits: during a séance a spirit retrieves a fur coat and a plate from a long distance; the plate breaks when it falls on the table and the fur coat is singed due to the friction induced heat produced by the extreme speed with which the spirit flew (p. 179), and a participant in a séance, who defies and mocks the spirits is knocked down and beat up severely by the spirits until he begs for mercy (p. 180).

Another unidentified source is »Beckett«, whom Heller quotes (p.182 f) to give a parallel to Furustolpe’s experience with the voice in the telephone receiver (pp. 92 f) already mentioned above. After Furustolpe has told herr Wendland all about his peculiar adventures, the latter murmurs: »Podgers, Beckett, Myers, Lodge« (p. 183).

Heller maintained that for any person who knew the works of Magnussen, Doyle and Lodge, and »current spritism«, there is nothing exaggerated in his novel *Andarna och Furustolpe*, or rather: only as much as humor demands.

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Frank Heller: *I sicksack genom sinnevärdmen* (Zigzag Through the Material World; Stockholm, 1925)

———Heller’s short story »Den andra sidan« (1925; *The Other Side*) deals with two recently deceased Americans, James F. Hannibal and Cassius G. Philpott, and the wife of the latter establishing contact with her husband through a medium, Mrs. Mary Bloomroth. The Philpotts have a stamped contract, in
which is stipulated, that the party that survives the other, is to seek contact with the dead partner through a medium. In the end, the spirit of Cassius G. Philpott goes to Paris, thus fulfilling the proverb »When good Americans die, they go to Paris« (pp. 82 f, 85). He gets help to leave his first miserable non-material existence in Limbo by James F. Hannibal, who was the owner of a travel agency when he lived and now works in the same capacity on the Other Side (Hannibal had died in a car accident in Paris, thus fulfilling the proverb already in his lifetime). At the séance in which his wife is informed of this, she is choked and breaks down: Philpott, a married man, in an infamous place like Paris, with ill-famed places like »Mowlin Rouge and Folly Birdgear« [Moulin Rouge and Follies Bergères]. The consequence is that she whispers Yes that same afternoon, and shortly after is remarried. Now we understand why we were informed in the beginning of the story, that Mrs. Philpott immediately after the news of her husband’s death went to Mrs. Bloomroth, »so she could personally convince herself that the deceased Mr. Philpott was indeed on the other side«, thus reassuring herself that it would be safe for her to remarry without becoming a bigamist. The Philpotts’ marriage, that seemed like an ideal marriage, was actually a total failure and both parties gain by its dramatic dissolution. The story is typical of Heller’s anti-Americanism: in this case it is what he perceives as typically American double moral standards, that are the focus of his criticism. In »Den andra sidan«, Heller expressly refers to Sir Oliver Lodge’s Raymond, mentioning the title twice (p. 81).

Frank Heller seems to have done research into Spiritism before writing Andarna och Furustolpe and »Den andra sidan«. This was a field that was probably new to him. He himself was a traditional Christian all his life (his father was a clergyman in the Church of Sweden). He does not seem ever to have had any positive relation to esotericism, but in Andarna och Furustolpe and »Den andra sidan« he merely exploits the weird and the comic in the séances. This was to change in his esoteric short stories »Hades’ renässans« (1930; Hades’s Renaissance) and »Spökguldet« (1932; Ghost Gold), in which the séances are put on stage for other than esoteric reasons.

This seems to have been an international as well as national subgenre. French bestseller Maurice Dekobra (pen name of Ernest-Maurice Tessier [1855–1973]) contributed to it with »Dormez, je le veux!« published in Contes en l’air (1929), and the Swedish authors of popular fiction Juan Gallardo (pen name of Carl Edlund [dates unknown]) and Gösta Segercrantz (pen name of Gösta Palmcrantz [1888–1978]) wrote in the same subgenre in »Medan andarna talar« (»While the Spirits Speak«) in the popular magazine Tidsfördrif 1928:34 and »Bordknackning« (»Table Knocking«) in Familjetidningen Smålänningen 29-4-1933, respectively.

Dag Hedman, »Playing with Esotericism. Frank Heller’s Novel Andarna och Furustolpe... «
Frank Heller: *Doktor Zimmertür säger farväl* (Doktor Zimmertür Bids Farewell; Stockholm, 1931)

In Frank Heller’s »Hades’ renässans« the Marquis of Montigny poses as a medium in order to be able to retrieve a pack of love letters from Mrs. Bainville in the darkness of the room without anybody noticing (by using a harpsichord for mailbox: the letters are placed and retrieved from under the lid of the instrument!). Oliver Lodge’s *Raymond* is quoted even here in connection with information about bars with alcoholic beverages on the Other Side. Arthur Conan Doyle is mentioned as the initiator of a suggestion, that mediums should be paid by the government (p. 216).

Another short story, »Spökguldet«, is about a Swedish magician, John Chayder, who goes to a séance together with his friend, Monsieur Marchand, chief inspector of the Detective Police Force of Monaco. The séance is held by a Madame Borsakov, whom Chayder describes as »épatante! Levitations, automatic handwriting, she accomplishes everything with the same facility«. Upon demand, Madame Borsakov’s control spirit gives the participants of the séance numbers on which to gamble at the Casino of Monte Carlo (cf. *Andarna och Furustolpe*, where the protagonist demanded advice for stock market speculations from the control spirit of herr Wendland). Suddenly, a stream of gold falls to the floor of the dimly lit room. Upon examination, the hoard turns out to consist of 100-franc coins, minted under Prince Charles III of Monaco (reigned 1856–1889) – the Ghost Gold heralded in the short story’s title. The whole thing is a hoax, of course: the coins are
not genuine, but manufactured by Madame Borsakov’s husband, an unsuccessful dentist, who has found out other things to make from gold than teeth. The idea was to sell the coins for several times their true value to the gullible participants of the séances.

All in all you could say that Frank Heller became more and more critical of Spiritism in his fiction. If this was a personal development or simply an adaptation to current vogues in the market for fiction is not known.

To wrap this up, let us consider the following quotation. It is from Frank Heller’s last book, an anthology titled *All världens sällsamma berättelser* (1947; Strange Stories of the World), and shows the author’s continued interest in stories about the spiritist world. In his introductory remarks to Thorne Smith’s (1892–1934) text, Heller writes:

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Thorne Smith is the name of an American writer, who has published a spiritistic romance, *Topper* [1926], a portion of which is printed here. Descriptions of life on the Other Side have become numerous since Conan Doyle wrote *The Land of Mist* [1926] and since the successful play *Outward Bound* [1923; by Sutton Vane (1888–1963)] was shown all over the world. But in these works the world of shadows is treated seriously. In later days is has become fashionable in Anglo-Saxon countries, to do the opposite. The words of the Apostle: o Death, where is thy sting? [1 Corinthians 15:55] has got a new and for him definitely very peculiar application. Of course, the reason is the descriptions of the spiritists themselves, and messages from a world of spirits, which resembles our own to a parodic degree. When Raymond in Oliver Lodge’s eponymous book communicates that spirits live in houses and that they refresh themselves in bars, it is understandable that the reader becomes alert. The best parody of such is Noel Coward’s [1899–1973] *Blithe Spirit* [1941]. But even the portion from Thorne Smith’s novel reprinted here is not without merit.

Whoever wishes to read a more serious, and in no way unlikely treatment of the same subject, should read Conan Doyle’s story »How It Happened« (in this collection). I wonder if it has not inspired one of Pär Lagerkvist’s [1891–1974] texts?

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F.H. 24
ENDNOTES

1 The novel was also serialized in the renowned Swedish daily newspaper Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfarts-Tidning between 23–9–1920 and 26–11–1920. Heller wrote to his German translator Marie Franzos (1870–1941) that he was working on his new novel, »der den Spiritismus in nicht allzu seriöser Weise behandelt« (»that treats spiritism in a not too serious fashion«). Letter dated »Bozen 21–9–[19]20«. Franzos wrote a »Nachwort« to the German edition of the novel, Furustolpe und die Geister (Munich, 1924), signed »M.F.«. This is the only known translation of the novel.

2 The setting of this scene may have been inspired by the Finnish Swedish author Johan Ludvig Runeberg’s (1804–77) short story »Lurendrejaren. En scen på hafvet« [»The Swindler. A Maritime Scene«] in Helsingfors Morgonblad May 1833 (issues 35–37), reprinted many times during the 19th century, and in Johan Ludvig Runebergs Samlade arbeten. Andra bandet (Helsingfors, 1861) pp. 186–210; modern edition in Samlade skrifter av Johan Ludvig Runeberg. Sjunde delen: Skönlitterär prosa (Svenska författare utgivna av Svenska Vitterhetsamfondet XVI. Ed.: Carl-Eric Thors. Helsingfors, 1978) pp. 13–35. Furustolpe does in fact have a portrait of Runeberg in his office (p. 60), which may have been intended as a hint by Heller.


4 »— Förnuftet, sade herr Wendland, kallas de skygglappar materialismen bundit oss västerlänningar för ögonen. I Indien, i det stora och visa Indien, ler man åt oss och vårt förnuft.« (p. 186)

5 Published in Swedish as Raymond eller Livet och döden in 1921, the year after Andarna och Furustolpe was released. Thanks are extended to Professor Henrik Bogdan, Gothenburg, for his identification of Oliver Lodge in a letter to Dag Hedman dated 15–4–2017.


7 Cf. Andarna och Furustolpe pp. 180, 183. In the novel, Furustolpe leaves herr Wendland carrying »a heavy load of
books under his arm for studies at home, translations from America’s and England’s foremost spiritists« (een tung packe böcker under armen till självstudium, översättningar från Amerikas och Englands främsta spiritister; p. 207).

8 Thanks are extended to Doctor Christian Giudice for suggesting this during the Gothenburg Workshop on May 5, 2017.

9 Thanks are extended to Doctor Per Faxneld for suggesting this during the Gothenburg Workshop on May 5, 2017.

10 The title Den andra sidan may have been inspired by Heller’s friend Henning Berger (1872–1924) and his novel Den andra sidan (1915). During World War I, Heller and Berger both lived in Copenhagen, and it is clear that Heller read his friend’s novels. Berger’s Den andra sidan is set in Copenhagen, just like Andarna och Furustolpe, and deals with a Doctor Albert Liebman, who rents a room in which there is a grand mirror, in which he sees people and actions, thus obtaining insights into another dimension of existence. In the end, however, this is explained as results of successful experiments in televising, with the mirror serving as a screen for the broadcastings. What initially seemed to be a novel about the occult rather turns out to be a science fiction story. More importantly, Heller gives long descriptions in Andarna och Furustolpe of passages in Podger’s Den andra sidan, which have nothing in common with Henning Berger’s Den andra sidan. Still another option would be Alfred Kublin’s (1877–1959) Die andere Seite. Ein phantastischer Roman (1909; The Other Side. A Fantastic Novel), which is set in a dreamland.

11 »för den som läst Jul Magnussens Guds Smil och Doyle, Lodge etc, och känner till spiritismen just nu, är det i ingen mån överdrivet, mer än hvad komik bör vara«. Letter to Olof Dahlberg, dated 8–8–1920.

12 First published in Julkvällen 1924, reprinted in I sicksack genom sinnevärlden (1925; Zigzag Through the Material World).

13 Frank Heller is alluding to Oscar Wilde: The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891), chapter 3.

14 »Han, en gift man! När man vet vad Paris är för en plats! Moulin Rouge och Folly Birdgear och det andra!« (p. 86)

15 »för att personligen övertyga sig om huruvida den avlidne mr Philpott befann sig på andra sidan« (s. 77).

16 »By studying Sir Oliver Lodge’s Raymond the guests in Mrs. Bloomroth’s house knew the Other Side was a faithful copy in every detail of This Side of the conception of the world. The spirits of the deceased lived in houses, they had clothes and books. […] They had bars with fortifying beverages, Raymond had told about this and it had been confirmed by American spirits through the mouth of Mrs. Bloomroth.« (»Genom studiet av sir Oliver Lodge’s Raymond visste gästerna i mrs Bloomroths hus, att den Andra Sidan var en trogen kopia i alla detaljer av Denna Sidan av världsbilden. De avlidnas andar
levde i hus, de hade kläder och böcker. [...] Det fanns barer där med stärkande drycker, det hade Raymond berättat, och det hade bekräftats av amerikanska andar genom mrs Bloomroths mun.«) – The name Bloomroth and occupation of James F. Hannibal are inspired by one of Frank Heller’s friends, Adolf Blomquist (1883–1956), who was the head of the Swedish travel agency Bureau Suédois in Paris 1920–36. According to Blomquist’s granddaughter Anna-Lisa Ericsson, Heller and Blomquist were acquainted since 1918, when they both lived in Copenhagen (letter from Ericsson to Hans Reusch, dated Norrtälje 20–7–1991). There is a large collection of letters from Heller, Henning Berger, Artur Möller and other Swedish authors to Adolf Blomquist in the Manuscript Department of the Lund University Library; cf. Blomquist, P.A., brevsamling, signum: LUB-903. Cf. also http://www3.ub.lu.se/arkivreg/blomquist.html.

17 Gösta Palmcrantz translated Dekobra’s short story into Swedish as »Jag vill, att du skall sova!« in Maurice Dekobra: Bravo, herr baron! och andra noveller (1931; Bravo, Mister Baron! and Other Short Stories).

18 Published in Vårt Hem 1930:24–25, reprinted in Doktor Zimmertür säger farväl (1931; Doktor Zimmertür Bids Farewell).

19 »It is true that one is served on the other side of the grave, according to Raymond« (»Och visserligen påstår Raymond att det finns servering på andra sidan graven«; p. 210).

20 One of the main characters, the well-known physicist and proposed Nobel Prize laureate Coningsby Crofts, is said to have written two books on Spiritism, Light, More Light! and From Saulus to Paulus (»Ljus, mer ljus! och Från Saulus till Paulus«; p. 209).

21 Published in Hemmets Journal 1932:7, reprinted in Monsieur Collet, kejserlig äventyrare (1932; Monsieur Collet, Imperial Adventurer).

22 »épatante! Levitationer, automatisk skrift, allt går lika lätt för henne«. Frank Heller: Monsieur Collet, kejserlig äventyrare (Stockholm, 1932) p. 133.

23 One of the earliest and most read examples of the parodic spirit play is Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz’s (1886–1939) W małym dworaku (1921; In the Little Farmstead), which was staged many times and printed in more than 100,000 copies in Poland, being part of the school curriculum.

24 »Thorne Smith heter en amerikansk författare som utgitt en spiritistisk äventyrsroman, kallad Topper, av vilken ett brottstyrcke här medtagits. Skildringar av livet på Andra Sidan ha blivit talrika, alltsedan Conan Doyle skrev sin Dimmornas land och sedan den lyckade teaterpjäsen Outward bound (Till främmande hamn) gick över all världens scener. Men i dessa tages skuggornas värld på allvar. På senare tid har det i anglosaxiska länder blivit mod att göra tvärtom.