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Medical thaumaturgy

It is by no means easy to perform miracles on this earth, in this age of scepticism and of evidence based incredulity.

But things are different at 35 000 feet, in an airplane, high up above the clouds. Here a qualified miracle worker may notice the red spots of Dr Henry Koplik of New York (1858-1927) and relieve the anxiety verging on hysteria of the mother of a blotchy, sniffly, febrile, loud, brattish child. He will "cure" the "stroke suspect" with a transient ulnar palsy sustained from sitting too long in economy class. He will wake up the heavy-set businessman who briefly passed out after drinking too much whisky in first class. With impeccable skill he will manage a confusing arrhythmia by applying an electrode to the chest of a man with an impalpable pulse. He will open the miracle box and press the green button, obey the injunction not to defibrillate, and witness with relief a spontaneous return to sinus rhythm.

But on the ground Italy is the best country for miracles. Imagine, for example, the crowded train from Ferrara to Bologna: a call for *dottore*; anxious relatives gathered around a cyanosed woman foaming at the mouth. No stethoscope, rudimentary Italian only. Doctor holds up jaw, makes her sit up, then waits. Woman deeply unconscious, not sweating, *niente diabetes*, no response to painful stimuli, pinpoint pupils. Could it be a pontine haemorrhage? But lifting one leg to test plantar reflexes has miraculous effect. Behold, she moves. Pupils dilate.

In a few minutes she stands up. Mumbles. Gropes around for her handbag. In Bologna a mustachioed conductor and a comely policewoman take over; time to take one's leave and run to catch last train for Milan.

On the outskirts of the baroque town of Lecce, under the hot Apulian sun, a young nun in full habit is seen bending over an older woman on the sidewalk. Blood everywhere. Mother down from Rome to visit daughter nun; wears sandals only; steps on a piece of glass. Dramatic intervention: tiny puncture wound on sole of foot; nun's handkerchief applied for 20 minutes; bleeding stops. Then it is time to move on, to other tasks, just as San Giorgio di Lecce might have done in the days when dragons infested the countryside, elfins danced on many a green mead, and miracle men walked about the land.