

MONSIEUR DELAMORT

RAFAEL SABATINI

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IN his outfit as a thorough-paced chevalier d'industrie, M. Delamort might be said to include all the more usual tools of his craft. He could tell your fortune by the cards, by your bumps, by the tea-cup, the crystal, or your hands; his legerdemain was a marvel of dexterity; he dabbled in hypnotism, and at times where a particularly weak-minded individual was his subject he achieved some slight measure of success. He practised medicine upon occasion, with results that were only a little more disastrous than those which frequently attend the efforts of duly qualified men.

Of all his accomplishments spiritualism was the one that afforded him the deepest measure of pride. Thanks to an ingenious fraud, with which, by the aid of a confederate, he had imposed upon simple folk in almost all the rural districts of France, he had amassed a very considerable sum of money, which is an easy explanation of his predilection for that branch of his trickster's profession.

His confederate, unfortunately, took it into his head to apply to other ends the dishonesty acquired in his partnership with Delamort; and so clumsy was he that he got himself arrested for embezzling, and sentenced to a term of three years' imprisonment.

To Delamort the loss was incalculable; nor did he think it even worth while to take any steps to repair it, despairing of ever finding another who could so plausibly play the part. He found himself compelled to abandon spiritualism. He no longer held forth to gaping villagers upon the mysteries of the spirit-world, no longer talked of "psychic forces" and the "obsessing flesh." He fell back upon the more vulgar and less remunerative craft of fortune-telling, and had to be content to pocket silver, where before he had taken gold.

And then quite by accident it came to him how he might resume his trade in ghosts, single-handed though he was.

It happened at Soreau, one evening. He was sitting in the village inn, entertaining a little crowd of rustics with an exposition of sleight-of-hand, and leaving them amazed at his miracles, when the subject of spiritualism was introduced by old Grosjean.

"There was a man of your name could raise ghosts," said the villager.

Delamort flashed him a piercing glance of his black, solemn eyes as he answered impressively: "I am that man."

There was a momentary hush, followed by a babel of questions from those of the party who were not believers in spiritual manifestations. It was the sort of challenge to which Delamort was accustomed, and one for which he had often angled in the old days.

Sheer force of habit brought him to his feet, that he might reply with fitting impressiveness, and for the next few minutes he descanted in his sharp, metallic voice upon that vexed question, causing his audience to gasp at the boldness of his statements.

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A tall, lean figure, dressed in clothes of faded black, aquiline of nose and clearcut of face, with long black hair brushed back from the forehead, fiery of glance and liberal of gesture, he imposed upon those simple men of Soreau as much by his presence, air, and voice as by the things he said.

Yet some materialists there were whom neither his manner nor his matter could impress, and among them was old Grosjean, who was, in his way, a man of fair education and some reading. It was this fellow whom Delamort singled out for his special prey upon this occasion.

A quick judge of character, he had read at a glance the cupidity so plainly advertised in Grosjean's close-set eyes, in the lines of his thin-lipped mouth, and in his lean, claw-like hands. To these very apparent characteristics of the old man did he owe the notion with which he was so suddenly inspired, and upon which he set himself at once to act.

"You may laugh, you fools!" he thundered, with a fine assumption of anger. "I have been laughed at before by men as ignorant. But I have changed their mirth to terror before I had done with them; and I will do as much for you if any here has the courage to submit to the trial."

Grosjean cackled contemptuously, whereupon Delamort swooped down upon him as does the hawk upon the sparrow.

"Derider!" he cried fiercely. "Dare you undergo the test?"

"Bah!" snarled Grosjean. "You are an impudent swindler. I have heard of you."

For a second Delamort's steady glance wavered. Then he recovered, and let it rest balefully upon the speaker.

"Insult," said he sententiously, "is a woman's argument, not a man's. I am no swindler."

"Prove it and I'll believe you," was the answer.

"Certainly I will prove it," returned Delamort promptly. "You have but to name the man whose spirit you would have me evoke, and I will undertake to render it visible and audible to your skeptic senses."

"Very well," quoth Grosjean, still derisive. "Let me behold my father's ghost and I will believe you, and withdraw the term I have applied to you."

His friends, and indeed they were all friends of his for Grosjean was as well known in Soreau as the steeple of the village church encouraged him in his attitude of defiance.

"You shall have your ghost," Delamort promised him grimly. "But, messieurs, I am not to be insulted in this fashion by a parcel of country clods without taking satisfaction for it. It is not my way to gamble over a matter so terrible as this which I am about to embark upon, but you have said so much that before I carry out M. Grosjean's demands I should like to know how much each of you is disposed to wager that I fail to do this thing?"

"I expected that," said Grosjean, with a senile chuckle, and he lacked not for chorus.

"Did you?" sneered Delamort in his turn. "And I suppose that, as it becomes a question of risking a little money, you would prefer not to submit, for fear that I should prove you wrong."

Grosjean's reply was to produce ostentatiously three napoleons and bang them on the table.

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"I'll wager those," he cried, "that you fail to raise me my father's ghost or, indeed, any ghost whatsoever."

"Excellent," said Delamort. "And these other gentlemen your friends will they also manifest in gold their opinion that I am an impostor?"

"I'll wager a louis," cried one, and his example was followed by almost every member of the company, until a little pillar of twenty-six napoleons stood upon the wine-stained table.

Delamort quietly produced his purse, and counted out a like sum. Then, taking up also the money staked by the company, and having obtained a sheet of paper, he wrapped up the fifty-two napoleons and handed the package to the landlord, begging him to act as stakeholder.

"Now monsieur," said he, turning to Grosjean, "if monsieur l'hTMte will find us a room I am ready to commence my seance."

II.

GROSJEAN paled a little before the man's assurance, and in consideration of the confidence which had led him to wager a sum of over six hundred francs. At heart, however skeptic, the old man was far from valiant, and he would certainly have backed out of the business had he seen a way of doing it without loss of prestige.

But he feared the derision of his friends. He braced himself with the assurance that there were no such things as ghosts, and that Delamort was an impostor, whom a sharp lookout on his part must baffle. With the determination to watch him very closely, and not permit himself to be fooled, he rose and announced himself ready.

The host conducted the pair to a room above, leaving the company in a state of mingled excitement and derision, to await the result of this odd experiment. Within the feebly lighted bedchamber which the landlord had assigned to them, Delamort bade his companion be seated, and approached him with eyes riveted on his, and hands busy at mesmeric passes. He had hopes of gaining sufficient influence over Grosjean to be able to mentally suggest to him that he saw the spirit of his dead father.

But it so happened that Grosjean, who, as I have mentioned, was educated above his station, had once read a book on mesmerism, and was acquainted with its methods. He recognized them in Delamort's antics and, with an indignant laugh, he rose to his feet.

"I think we have had enough of this foolery, M. Delamort," he said. "I half expected that you would resort to hypnotism to gain your ends."

"You are acquainted, then, with hypnotism?" quoth Delamort, a trifle crestfallen, slipping his hand into his pocket as he spoke.

"Sufficiently acquainted with it to see through you, my friend," answered Grosjean. "I think that I may fairly claim to have won my wager."

"One moment," Delamort implored him.. "It is an interesting topic hypnotism. Doubtless you are aware of the effect produced by the contemplation of a bright disk or ring?"

"Yes," answered the other dubiously. "What of it?"

"I am about to have recourse to it in consequence of my failure with the mesmeric passes," was the cool rejoinder. "I beg that you will contemplate this."

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Grosjean found himself staring at the bright rim of the barrel of a revolver, with which Delamort had suddenly covered him.

"Bon Dieu!" he ejaculated in affright.

"Ah!" purred Delamort, with manifest satisfaction. "By your face and manner I see that you are already coming under the influence. Now, be good enough to reseate yourself and listen to me."

Grosjean obeyed him with that alacrity which terror alone can impart.

"Excellent," murmured the occultist. "The hypnotic power of a pistol–nozzle has no equal. Now, sir, I think that you are sufficiently warned of the manner of man you have to deal with, to sit quietly and listen to what I have to propose."

"You don't mean to shoot me?" cried Grosjean interrogatively.

"Shoot you? By no means. You will be far too reasonable. I am exerting no more than a slight persuasion to induce you to listen to me."

"Then, will you would you mind putting that thing away? You wouldn't believe how easy it is to have an accident with firearms."

With the utmost affability, Delamort slipped the pistol back into his pocket.

III.

"NOW, to business," said Delamort. "You may think, monsieur, that I am a rank impostor. I am not. I am a genuine spiritualist, as well as something of a hypnotist. Indeed, I have a reputation to maintain. Now, it occasionally happens that I come across a man so strongminded, of such determination and willpower that my art is defeated and baffled. Such a man, my dear M. Grosjean, are you. I confess it with regret, for it is never pleasant to find ourselves confronted by a stronger individuality, which will not bring itself under our control."

Grosjean, who was recovering from his fears, smiled, with the pleasure occasioned him by these elaborate compliments.

"While my failure, monsieur," Delamort continued, "makes you the gainer of a paltry three napoleons, it occasions me the loss of over six hundred francs. As you will readily perceive, there is no proportion in this. Besides, I am a poor man, M. Grosjean; and, in addition to the loss of all this money, there is the further loss of character and prestige, which will be nothing short of ruinous to me. You understand?"

Grosjean grinned until his yellow face was wrinkled into the semblance of a crumpled parchment.

"I understand, but I am afraid I cannot help you. It is the fortune of war." He endeavored to give his voice an inflection of polite regret, but the pleasure of gaining three napoleons was not so lightly to be suppressed by a man of Grosjean's grasping nature.

"Pardon," returned Delamort. "But you can help me, and by helping me you can help yourself. Now, if instead of three napoleons, your profit by my failure were to be six, would it not be worth your while to save my reputation?"

"What do you mean?" quoth Grosjean suspiciously.

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"Just this. If you will acknowledge to your friends that you have seen your father's ghost, and consequently lost your wager, I will pay you nine napoleons that is, the three you have staked and the six I am giving you in compensation."

Grosjean's eyes brightened with greed.

"It would be doing you a good service, would it not saving your reputation?"

"Assuredly."

"Also, it would be making you a profit of the twenty-six napoleons staked by my friends, eh?"

"Why, yes. But not twenty-six, my friend. Seventeen napoleons will be my total profit after I have settled with you."

Grosjean reflected a moment; then a cunning smile spread on his face. "I admire your method of raising ghosts, M. Delamort," said he with jeering irony. He shook his head and laughed. "No, no, my friend. Such a service as you are asking of me is worth more than six napoleons. You are proposing a revolting course to me. I can't do it. I really can't."

"You are throwing away money, monsieur, by your refusal," Delamort reminded him. "Surely a gain of six napoleons is better than a gain of only three. And you are earning it without any trouble or inconvenience. How much better would you be if I did raise your father's ghost? It would only scare you to death. I beg that you will seriously consider my proposal."

"I can't be a party to such a swindle. I really can't not for six napoleons, anyhow. If I practise this wretched deceit upon my trusting friends, I must have half your profit. That is to say, I must have thirteen napoleons."

"I'll give you ten."

"Thirteen or I'll walk out and denounce you for an impudent impostor. Make your choice."

Some one knocked at the door. His friends were becoming anxious.

"Are you all right, Grosjean?" inquired a voice, to which the old man returned an affirmative reply.

"Has he raised the spirit yet?"

"Not yet," answered Grosjean, while Delamort added: "But I hope to do so in a moment or two, if you will refrain from interrupting me. Have the goodness not to disturb us again." Then to Grosjean, in a whisper: "Now, monsieur," said he, "what is it to be? Will you accept ten napoleons?"

"Thirteen," was the laconic answer, delivered with finality.

"Very well, then. Thirteen be it, provided that you will follow out my instructions."

"What are they?"

"You are to scream two or three times, and then fall down and simulate a swoon as best you can, reviving only after I have admitted your friends."

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"Parfaitement," said the old traitor, his greedy eyes shining with avarice. "Pay me the money now, so that my friends will have no suspicions."

Delamort produced his purse and carefully took thirteen napoleons from it, one by one. One by one he delivered them to his companion.

"See that they don't jingle," he admonished him; "for if any one were to hear it he would suspect."

Grosjean nodded that he understood, and pocketed each coin as he received it. When he had received the thirteenth he still put forth his hand, and upon being asked by Delamort what he wanted, he insolently replied that he wanted the return of his stake of three napoleons.

"That was included. It was to be thirteen altogether," the occultist protested. But Grosjean had not so understood it, and swore that he would not perform his part of the bargain until he received another sixty francs.

They wrangled for some moments, Delamort protesting that thus Grosjean was making more out of it than he was himself. In the end he was forced to give in and pay the further money demanded, which he did with the worst grace in the world.

IV.

"NOW for your part, monsieur," said Delamort; "and see that you play me no tricks."

It was unlikely that he would, since were he to betray the occultist he must forego the gain he was making. Rising from his chair, he awoke the echoes of the inn with a scream that was a masterpiece of blood-curdling vociferation.

"Excellent," Delamort approved. "Repeat it."

Obediently, Grosjean emitted a second shriek more dreadful than the first. There came an excited knocking at the door.

"Don't touch me don't touch me!" screamed Grosjean, prompted by Delamort. "Mon Dieu! I am terrified. Oh!"

With that final moan he let himself fall heavily, and from his position he winked wickedly at Delamort. The occultist now turned to the door, which he opened immediately.

"What are you doing to him?" demanded half a dozen of Grosjean's friends as they sprang into the room.

"No more than I undertook to do," Delamort replied. "I think you had better attend to him. The sight of his father has frightened him a little, but he will be all right shortly."

They hastened to the prostrate man, and raised him tenderly.

"There. He is better now," exclaimed one.

"His color is returning," announced another.

"I feared that ill would come of it," put in a third. "It is an evil thing to tamper with the dead."

"As for you," snarled a fourth, angrily shaking his fist in Delamort's face, "you ought to be hanged, you wizard."

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"I am no wizard," answered Delamort, truthfully enough. "As M. Grosjean there can tell you, I have worked by perfectly natural means."

Grosjean, now feigning to recover, was giving the company an awe-inspiring account of the apparition that had visited him.

"I am punished," groaned that old scoundrel. "Never again will I laugh at spiritualism." Then to the host: "You may hand the stakes to M. Delamort," he said. "He has certainly won his wager, curse him!"

It was with an extremely ill grace that the landlord handed the occultist the package containing the money. Delamort accepted it in silence, and slipped it into his pocket. His business being thus concluded, he was on the point of taking his leave of the company, when the landlord rudely accelerated his departure by a request that he should take himself off the premises.

"I've had enough of spiritualism in my house," he swore, with a vigorous oath.

"monsieur is a bad loser," was Delamort's cold answer, as he took the hint and his leave without further delay.

It was after his departure that old Grosjean felt the need of a glass of cognac to revive him. That was natural enough, but that he should invite several of his friends to a glass of something, at his expense, was a departure from the ordinary grasping course of his existence which occasioned them some measure of surprise.

Seeing ghosts was evidently a salutary occupation, if it could instil generosity into so mean a heart as Grosjean's. They profited by his mood, and accepted with alacrity the offer he made; and while they drank his health he fished from his pocket a golden napoleon with which to pay.

The landlord took the coin, glanced at it, and rang it on the table. It emitted a most unmusical timbre.

"It's cracked," some one suggested.

"It's bad," the landlord stated as he handed it back to Grosjean.

"Bad?" echoed the old fellow, with a sudden pang of apprehension. "Bad? Impossible! Anyhow, here is another one."

While he was examining the coin the landlord had returned to him, he heard the second one give out the same false sound. Dim suspicion now became sickening certainty. With an oath he drew from another pocket a five-franc piece, to pay for the drink which in a moment of expansion he had offered his compeers.

"Wherever did you get those coins from, M. Grosjean?" inquired the host. "Surely some one has victimized you."

Deeper than words can tell were his rage and mortification. Yet deeper still was the old man's wisdom, for he held his peace touching the transaction by which those coins had passed into his hands.

[The End]