

The Spiritualist: A Story of the Occult.

RAFAEL SABATINI

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IN quest of local colour in that part of France that once was known as Languedoc, I spent a week last autumn in the little village of Aubepine. I stayed at the Hotel du Cerf, whereof Jules Coupri is host, and for companions of an evening I had the village notary, a couple of grocers, a haberdasher — who was in his way a leader of fashion in Aubepine — the postmaster, and half-a-dozen young farmers, who were in the habit of coming there to drink their petit-vin and exchange their ideas.

A student of human nature in my humble way, I made a point of mingling freely with them, and I am afraid that their patience and good nature drew me to talk a good deal. But on the eve of my departure I was for once cast into the shade by a young seafaring man of the better sort, who was, he informed us, on his way to Carcassonne. He expatiated upon the wonders of Greece and Italy with such eloquent picturesqueness that he monopolised the attention which hitherto I had enjoyed without competition.

But my revenge was to come. Towards nine o'clock a tall, swarthy man, dressed in black clothes, which, if seedy, were of more or less fashionable cut, and wearing a chimney-pot hat, stalked into the room, and called for the landlord. He wanted supper as quickly as possible for himself and his driver — he travelled in a ramshackle carriage — and announced to all that he must push on that night to St. Hilaire. He was evil-looking of face, yet not without distinction. The nose was thin as the bill of an eagle, and as curved; the forehead high and narrow, with absurdly long, black hair brushed straight back; the eyes were close-set and piercing; the mouth little more than a straight line above the square, lean chin. He was on the whole a striking individual, and from the moment of his advent he absorbed the attention of all present.

Seemingly aware of the impression he had created, he came over to the table at which I sat, and fell easily into conversation with those about upon small matters of provincial interest. In less than five minutes the sailor and his voyages were forgotten.

I was still speculating upon the man's business in life — for I am of those who believe that a man bears upon him the outward signs of his profession — when a young farmer happened to mention that his vineyards had been doing badly for the last three years — ever since his brother's death. The stranger's gimlet eyes were instantly turned upon him.

"What do you suppose to be the reason of it?" he inquired in a voice that was curiously impressive.

"Reason?" echoed young Pascal. "There is no reason. It is an unpleasant coincidence."

A saturnine smile overspread the stranger's face.

"So the ignorant ever say," he deprecated. "Young man, there is no such thing as coincidence in the vulgar sense." Then he galvanised the peasant by asking: "Have you seen your brother since?"

"Seen him? But then monsieur has not understood that he is dead!"

"And since when may we not see the dead?"

"Do you mean his spirit?" gasped Pascal.

"Call it by what name you will, I mean your brother."

"Does monsieur believe then in revenants?"

"No, monsieur, I do not. There are no revenants; that is to say, there are none who return, for they are always with us; here, around us, everywhere." And he tossed his arms about him, and glanced this way and that to emphasise his meaning. "It is the body only which they quit. The earth never. And their souls, no longer clogged and stultified by the obsessing flesh, are not confined to the present as are we. For them the past is clear, and the future holds no mysteries.

"They know the causes of things, the origin of matter, and its final ending. That, monsieur, is why I asked you had you seen your brother. It is clear that you have not done so. That would be foolish, were it not that it is in

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ignorance that you have submitted to the fate which is ruining your vineyard. If you had been better informed touching these matters you would have held intercourse with your brother, and obtained from him enlightenment. Thus might you by now have remedied the evil."

Those present sat silent and awe-stricken. To many of them, in their ignorant, credulous, superstitious way, this man, who spoke so seriously of communion with the dead, must have appeared a wizard, if not the very fiend himself — a belief to which his fantastic personality would lend colour.

"Does monsieur mean that I can cause my brother to appear to me!"

"If you were enlightened you might do so. As it is ——" He paused, shrugged his shoulders, and curled his lips contemptuously — "I am afraid you cannot."

"But can such things be done?" cried the haberdasher.

"Assuredly," answered the spiritualist. "In Paris they are done every day."

"Ah — in Paris," sighed one to whom nothing seemed impossible when associated with that wonderful name.

"Can you do it?" asked the haberdasher bluntly, yet with a certain awe lurking in his question.

The man smiled the quiet smile of one who is conscious of his strength.

"Have you never heard of M. Delamort?" he asked — much as he might have asked: "Have you never heard of Bonaparte?"

They were silent, from which he seemed to gather that his fame, however great elsewhere, had not travelled yet as far as this.

"I am a member of the Socié t Transempirique, which devotes itself to researches in the spirit-world," he informed them.

Thereupon they fell to questioning him fearfully as to whether he had ever held communion with a spirit, to which he answered vaingloriously:

"With hundreds, messieurs."

At that the sailor, who, I imagined, would be nursing a grudge against this man who had stripped him of his popularity, burst into a contemptuous laugh, which acted as a cold douche upon the audience. M. Delamort glared at him with angry eyes, but the man's expression of disbelief found many an echo, and from one or two I even caught the contemptuous word "Charlatan!"

"Fools," cried the spiritualist, his voice like a rumble of distant thunder. "Crass, ignorant clods! You live out your animal lives in this corner of the world much as a rat lives in its burrow. As your minds are closed to intelligence, so, too, do you close your ears to knowledge. Derision is the ever-ready weapon of the ignorant, and because the things I tell you are things of which you never dreamt in your unenlightened lives, you laugh and call me charlatan. But I will give you proof that what I have said is true. I will let you see the extent of my powers."

He addressed us all, collectively; but ever and anon his glance wandered to the sailor, who had been the first to express his want of faith, as though to him he conveyed a special challenge.

Receiving no answer, Delamort looked about from one to another, until his sinister glance lighted on Pascal.

"Will you submit yourself to the test?" he asked. "Will you let me summon your brother's spirit for you?"

The young man recoiled and made the sign of the cross. "God forbid!" he ejaculated.

With a contemptuous laugh the spiritualist turned from him to the sailor.

"Are you also afraid?" he demanded witheringly.

"I?" faltered the fellow, and a sickly smile spread over his weather-beaten face. "I am not afraid. I do not believe in your impostures."

"Excellent," exclaimed Delamort with a satanic grin. "You do not believe, therefore you are not afraid."

"Certainly I am not afraid," answered the young man with more assurance. Delamort's contempt seemed to have effectively roused him.

"Then you will submit to the test, and you shall see whether or not I have the power to raise the spirit of the dead — to render them visible to mortal eyes. You shall tell these gentlemen then whether I am an impostor. Whose ghost shall I evoke for you, monsieur?" he ended, rising as he spoke. All sat staring in horror and genuinely afraid. But the sailor's scepticism was not again to be shaken.

"I'll not submit to any mummeries of yours," he announced. "I know your ways, and I am not to be humbugged by any lying conjurer."

"It is not mummery and it is not humbug as I shall prove. Why insult me so? Name rather some dead friend or

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relative with whom you wish to commune, and I will gratify your wish."

A sudden look of cunning flashed in the sailor's face.

"Can I have my own way in this?" he asked briskly. "May I select the room in which I am to commune with the spirit?"

"But certainly."

"And may I also keep it from your knowledge whose spirit I wish to see?"

His tone and manner were full of insolence and craftiness. Delamort hesitated for an instant.

"It were better that I should know," he said at last.

"There," cried the sailor triumphantly, appealing to the audience. And he would have added more but that Delamort interrupted him.

"Fool, if you insist upon it, I will remain in ignorance of the name of your spirit. But lest you should tell us afterwards that I have evoked the wrong one, I shall ask you to impart the name to these gentlemen whilst I am out of earshot. Come now, are we agreed?"

The sailor announced himself ready to comply, and Delamort left the room at once, Pascal, at the sailor's bidding, stationing himself at the door. Then the sailor set himself to harangue us.

He had seen an illusionist do such things, he announced, at a theatre at Marseilles, by means of ventriloquism and a magic-lantern. It was nothing but trickery, he swore, and if we would unite with him, we would teach this impostor a lesson that he would remember.

With one accord we all pronounced ourselves ready to conspire with him — for what is there sweeter in all the world than to trick a trickster, to hoist him with his own petard? His plan was simple enough. He would choose the room in which to receive his ghostly visitant at the last moment, and we were to remain outside with Delamort, and see that he never for a second set foot within it. Thus should he be completely baffled. Already he was labouring under serious difficulties by not knowing whose spirit he was desired to evoke. The sailor announced then to us that he wished to see the ghost of his friend Gravine who had fallen overboard on the last voyage.

The plot being laid, Delamort was recalled and informed that the sailor was ready to submit himself to the test.

"You will not tell me whom you wish to see?" he asked.

"No, monsieur. You yourself confessed that it was not essential."

"Parfaitement," answered Delamort, bowing. "Monsieur is still sceptical?"

"So sceptical that if you care to make a little wager with me ——"

"This is a serious matter," interrupted the spiritualist sternly. "It would ill become me to employ my powers for purposes of gain."

"I was proposing," said the sailor readily, "that you should employ them for purposes of loss, but I thought you would refuse," he sneered, winking at us.

Delamort threw back his head like one affronted.

"Since you put it that way," he cried angrily, "I will consent even to a wager. I am a poor man, monsieur, but I will stake every penny that I have about me that you shall not be disappointed."

He took out his purse, and emptied a cascade of gold on to the table.

"Here, monsieur, are fifty napoleons. When you have covered that sum I shall be ready to begin the sance."

At that the sailor was taken aback. He looked about him pathetically. Then he drew from his breast-pocket a coloured kerchief, and carefully untied it. From this he took six gold pieces, which he placed very quietly and humbly upon the table.

"I am only a sailor, monsieur, and I am very poor. This is all that at the moment I am possessed of. It seems, sir, that for want of money I am only to earn six of your napoleons?" He paused, and his eyes wandered timidly over the company. Then he sighed. "It is a sin that where fifty napoleons are to be picked up, only six should be taken."

At that, up leapt Pascal, and slapped two louis upon the table, announcing that he would wager that amount against M. Delamort. He was followed by the haberdasher with four louis; then came another with three, and another with five, and so on, until forty napoleons stood against the spiritualist's pile of fifty. And then, lest he should retain the ten napoleons that had not been covered, the landlord ran upstairs and fetched that amount himself. I was the only man who had taken no part in the wager. I was not altogether so sure that the seafaring

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man was right. I had heard strange things concerning spiritualism, and whilst I had not heard enough to induce me to attach any appreciable degree of credit to it, still I knew too little to dare to disbelieve utterly.

Delamort, who had been looking on with an anxiety which heightened the saturnine expression of his countenance, observed this fact, and now that the money was all there, he gathered up the hundred napoleons, slipped them into his purse, and handed this to me.

"Monsieur is a gentleman," he said by way of explaining why he selected me as the man to be intrusted with the stakes. "Also he has no interest in the money. Will you keep this, monsieur, and afterwards either deliver it to me or divide it amongst these good people should I fail?"

"If it is the wish of all ——" I began, when they at once proclaimed their unanimous consent.

"And now, M. Delamort," said the sailor with a leer and a swagger, "I have announced to the company whose is the ghost I wish to commune with, and I am ready. Come with me."

"But whither?" inquired poor Delamort, who appeared by now to have lost the last shred of his magnificent assurance.

"To the room I have chosen."

Delamort bit his lip, and a look of vexation crossed his face; whereat those good fellows nudged each other, grinned and whispered. But the spiritualist made no objection, and so we went upstairs to the room in which the sailor was to sleep. At the door he paused and turned to us.

"Remain here with M. Delamort. I will enter alone."

"I only ask, monsieur," said Delamort — and his tone seemed firmer again, as though he were regaining confidence — that you sit without light of any description, whilst here, too, we must remain in the dark, if you please, gentlemen. M. l'Hote, will you have the goodness to extinguish the lamp? I have no directions to give you touching the arrangements of your room, monsieur," he continued, turning to the sailor again "but I must ask you to leave a sheet of paper on the table. I will command the spirit to inscribe his name on it, so that all here may be satisfied that your visitor is the one you have desired to see."

At that a thrill of doubt ran through the audience. Much might be done by ventriloquism and magic lanterns — as the sailor had assured them — but of the magic lantern they saw no sign, and, in any event, neither magic lantern nor ventriloquism could write a name on paper. The sailor himself seemed staggered for a moment.

"I will do so, monsieur," he faltered.

With that he went within and closed the door, turning the key on the inside. A moment later the landlord had extinguished the light, and we were left in utter darkness. The last glimpse I had of Delamort, he was crouching by the door of the sailor's room.

A silence followed, which seemed to last an eternity. The only sound was the occasional whispering of the spiritualist and the breathing of some twenty men in whose hearts doubt was swelling to fear with every second of that uncanny expectancy. Ten minutes had perhaps gone by when we heard a rap on the door, and from within came the sailor's voice.

"How much longer am I to wait, M. Delamort? I must ask you to fix a limit. I have no desire to sit here in the dark all ——"

The voice ceased abruptly. There was a dull thud, as of a body hurtling against the door, and with it there came a groan of fear. The groan almost found an echo in the gasps of the waiting company. Myself, I plead guilty to an uncanny thrill, and I might entertain you with my creepy sensations at some length were not my story more concerned with other matters.

There followed a silence of some few seconds, then we heard the sailor's voice raised in a blood-curdling scream.

"Don't come near me, don't come near me!" he shrieked. "Let me out, Delamort! Let me out, for God's sake, monsieur!" There was a rustle as of someone moving. Then a long-drawn wail of "Jesu!" That was followed by the sound of a heavy fall, and then silence.

The landlord was the first to recover the use of his wits; the fear of a tragedy in his house rousing him to action. He pushed roughly through to the door.

"Here, someone," he begged. "Help me to break in."

There was a groaning and cracking of woodwork and the report of the bursting door. Simultaneously a maid appeared with a lamp. I took it from her and hastened into the room in the wake of Delamort and the landlord.

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Stretched on the floor, his eyes closed, his face ghastly pale, and distorted by a fearful grin, lay the sailor. That and a smell of something that had burned was all that we noticed at first.

The rustics remained on the threshold, their faces pale and scared, asking whether the sailor were dead. Delamort, who had been on his knees beside him, reassured us. It was only a swoon. And presently, when he loosened his neckwear and sponged his head and pulses, the man opened his eyes and groaned, but was clearly no worse for whatever he had undergone. The villagers now crowded fearlessly into the room, and some were already plying the sailor with questions as he sat on the floor with Delamort supporting him. Suddenly a diversion was created by Pascal, who uttered a cry that was almost a shriek. Turning quickly to seek the cause of this, I beheld him pointing to something on the table at which he was staring in an awe-struck manner. I approached and beheld a sheet of paper on which had been burnt, as if with a red-hot iron, the name "Gravine."

Such in brief was my first introduction to spiritualism. M. Delamort left Aubepine an hour later, and pursued his journey to St. Hilaire. But the sailor was not himself until the following morning, and even when he had recovered from the shock occasioned him by his unearthly visitant, he sustained a fresh one when he realised that he lost his wager and his six louis.

I was at Angeville a fortnight later, staying with a cousin of mine who resides there. On the evening of my arrival my cousin took me round the old-world town, and in the course of things led me into the Peacock Inn. As we entered the general room, a familiar voice assailed my ears with familiar words.

"Fools," it cried. "Crass, ignorant fools! You live out your lives in this wretched corner of the world much as a rat lives in its burrow, and as your minds are closed to intelligence, so, too, do you close your ears to knowledge. Derision is the ever-ready weapon of the ignorant, and because the things that I tell you are things of which you never dreamt in your unenlightened lives you laugh and call me charlatan."

It was, of course, M. Delamort. As I craned my neck to catch a glimpse of his lean, cadaverous face, I heard a sudden and contemptuous laugh, with which I also seemed familiar. I turned in the direction of the sound, and there, surely enough, I beheld my friend the sailor, baiting the spiritualist as he had done at Aubepine.

I was on the point of denouncing them as a couple of impostors and swindlers, when for some reason or other I held my peace. I had a sort of feeling that would be like taking vengeance upon them for having fooled me in common with those others at Aubepine. I am rather ashamed to confess it, but I turned and quitted the Peacock Inn, leaving those ingenious tricksters to continue to exploit their spiritualistic mummery.

[The End]