

EXCERPT FROM Léo d'Hampol: *The Missing Link*

Someone rings at the gate.

It is Dr. Debert, an old school friend who practices in Versailles. When he crosses the Vésinet, he never fails to come and visit me.

We are chatting of trivial things, when he suddenly exclaims:

"Ah! I forgot to relate a most interesting thing I did. A few days ago I was a witness at a duel, a serious duel, my dear man, between your old enemy Mr. de Videmar and a Polish gentleman."

"Well! I saw that in the newspaper, but your name was not mentioned."

"Could be the press has indeed not made much of it since de Videmar's adversary, count Ladislas Wolsky, is a strange individual, enigmatic and profoundly distasteful. The count was struck fully in the chest."

My ears perked up. Debert continued:

"The wound seemed serious, but oddly enough the wounded man and one of the witnesses, a haughty and unpleasant-looking old man, refused my care."

"Go on," I said breathlessly.

"What's wrong with you?"

"For God's sake, go on!"

"I spoke again of this to Videmar, who seemed only mildly surprised and who passed on rather strange information regarding Wolsky. It seems this Polish count had moldered for some time in a Siberian prison, where he would have contracted a deforming type of rheumatism, which required him to almost always lie down or sit. However, he has a reputation as a swordsman which somewhat belied the condition which should rather have kept him bedridden."

"How is he physically?" I blurted out, prey to unutterable emotions.

"The count is ugly; of a simian ugliness. The forehead is low and retreating, the bright eyes lost in bushy eyebrows, the exceedingly narrow, razor-cut lips thrust forward in a queer prognathism. Overall he is massive, almost repugnant. The quarrel arose over a dropped glove. The count, no doubt to mock de Videmar, who is rather myopic, got down on hands and knees to find it. Videmar, who did not take well to the joke, wished to punish the Polish man, and without the intervention of several friends the scene would have degenerated into fisticuffs.

As Debert spoke, a veil was torn aside. I understood and was terrified.

"Do you not know the name of the old man who was his witness?"

"It was spoken before me wait."

"Was it not Bronzkowitch?"

"That's it!"

"Well then, your count Ladislas, the Polish aristocrat who crossed swords with Videmar, is not a man."

Debert's eyes opened particularly wide.

"No, it is not a man it is a monster or rather, an individual which stands between the ape and man."

"You're crazy!"

"No, I'm quite sane. I remember something told me in confidence by a Russian colleague regarding the son of one of his friends, Dr. Bronzkowitch. The latter, a great admirer of Lamarck, Huxley, Darwin and Haeckel, was passionately involved in discovering the 'missing link,' the link missing between the ape and man; he sought it frenetically, madly!

"Then, Nature, as if she wished to avenge herself of this man who sought to expose her most intimate secrets, recreated in a child which the brilliant doctor's wife bore, the archetype of the link Darwin had searched for.

"The friend who told me all this, described to me in such a manner that I would be hard pressed to duplicate, the horror of the situation. Bronzkowitch dedicated his life and his wealth to making a

man out of his ape. Thankfully, like the missing link, even if an upright stance was painful to him, he only stood up long enough to mislead those around him, and he was capable of articulate speech. It is frightening! Do you understand now the story of the Siberian prison, why the center of attention was always tired, sitting or lying down—because he was only comfortable on all fours.

“If you aren’t yet convinced, the story I’m going to tell you will dissipate your doubts,” and immediately I gave him a complete account of my adventure.

When I was finished, Debert, who was deep in thought, said to me:

“We must get to the bottom of this affair.”

Thanks to my recollections, I was able to find the path I had followed in escaping the homicidal bullets. There was the wall I climbed over in the wet soil, one could still see signs of my footsteps, and those of another, those of the old man, desperate to see me dead.

But where was the house? I could see only ruins. Nothing was left but a few unstable walls and some calcinated beams. The old man had kept his secret by blowing himself up with his son, the ape-man. Debert and I looked at one another.

“It is a shame,” he muttered. “What a lovely presentation we could have made to the Academy of Sciences.”