

Camille Flammarion (1842-1925)

Founder of the Juvisy Observatory and French Astronomical Society, Camille Flammarion (February 26, 1842 to June 3, 1925) is remembered in astronomy for his balloon ascents between 1868 and 1873, and for his study of the upper atmosphere, double and multiple stars, and the topography of the planet Mars. He was called the “Poet of the Heavens.” Influenced by the research of fellow Frenchman Allan Kardec, Flammarion became interested in psychical research in 1861, at age 19. Sixty-three years later, in 1923, he served as president of the Society for Psychical Research. The word “psychic” is said to have originated with Flammarion in his 1865 book, *Unknown Natural Forces*.

“It requires a good deal of boldness to insist on affirming, *in the name of positive science*, the possibility of these phenomena (wrongly styled supernatural), and to constitute one’s self the champion of a cause apparently ridiculous, absurd, and dangerous, knowing, at the same time, that the avowed adherents of said cause have little standing in science, and that even its eminent partisans only venture to speak of their approval of it with bated breath,” Flammarion wrote in that 1865 book.¹

Among the mediums Flammarion studied during his more than six decades in psychical research were Home, Henry Slade, Buguet, Rodière, Lacroix, Kluski, and Paladino.

In the first chapter of *Mysterious Psychic Forces*, published in 1907, Flammarion wrote that he proposed to show the truth in the phenomena of table-turnings, table-movings, and table-rappings, and in the communications received there-from, in levitations, in the moving of objects without contact, in unexplained noises, and in the

stories told of haunted houses. In the book he discussed his experiments with Eusapia Paladino during 1905 and 1906, in which surprising manifestations were witnessed not only by himself but by other scientists. Following his study of Paladino, Flammarion declared that “Mediumistic phenomena have for me the stamp of absolute certainty and incontestability, and amply suffice to prove that unknown physical forces exist outside the ordinary and established domain of natural philosophy.”²



However, Flammarion devoted a chapter of the 1907 book to tricks, deception, feats of legerdemain, and frauds with mediums, including Paladino. “...those who think that frauds of the mediums give the death blow to mediumship are deceived,” he wrote. “Mediumship exists, as well as hysteria, as well as hypnotism, as well as somnambulism. Trickery also exists.”³ He goes on to explain that real phenomena exhaust the medium of her “vital force” and when she is exhausted and unable to produce genuine phenomena she might turn to deception. But, he stressed, much of the deception is while she is in a trance or semi-trance condition. “Her fixed idea is to produce

phenomena; and she produces them, no matter how," he further explained.⁴ (Note: Other researchers have explained that in the unconscious type of fraud, the spirits controlling the medium are directing her movements and thus it only appears that the medium is cheating. That is, actual phenomena are taking place even if it appears that the medium is effecting it.)

While apparently accepting the reality of psychic phenomena at an early age, Flammarion remained skeptical as to whether the communication coming through mediums was from spirits or was a mysterious product of the medium's subconscious, the latter view held at the time by Drs. Charles Richet and Gustave Geley, both dedicated French psychical researchers. "That souls survive the destruction of the body I have not the shadow of a doubt," he wrote in his 1907 book. "But that they manifest themselves by the processes employed in séances the experimental method has not yet given us absolute proof. I add that this hypothesis is not at all likely."⁵

But by the time Flammarion produced his trilogy of books, *Death and Its Mystery: Before Death* (1922), *Death and Its Mystery: At the Moment of Death* (1922), and *Death and Its Mystery: After Death* (1923), he had surrendered to the spirit hypothesis. "The most usual communications are those from relatives and friends," he wrote in his 1923 book. "They are with us, or, rather, distance does not exist for them. Some unforeseen circumstance often suffices to reveal their presence. The dead show their survival in the most varied ways."⁶

In his later years, Flammarion became impatient with mainstream science and its resistance to the evidence for survival, commenting that to have too much intellect is sometimes a hindrance to the simple comprehension of things as they are. "Universal ignorance is the result of that miserable human individualism that is so self-sufficient," he continued. "The need of living by the spirit is felt by no one, or almost no one. Men who think are the exception. If these researches lead us to employ our minds better, to find what we are here to do, on this earth, we may be satisfied with this work; for, truly, our life as human beings seems very obscure."⁷

∞

¹ Flammarion, Camille, *Mysterious Psychic Forces*, Small, Maynard and Co., 1907, p. xiv.

² Fodor, Nandor, *Encyclopaedia of Psychic Science*, University Books, 1966, p. 141.

³ Flammarion, *Mysterious*, p. 195.

⁴ _____, p. 211.

⁵ _____, p. 439.

⁶ Flammarion, Camille, *Death and Its Mystery: After Death*, The Century Co., 1923, p. 352.

⁷ Flammarion, Camille, *Death and Its Mystery: Before Death*, T. Fisher Unwin, Ltd., 1922, p. 26.