

## HYSTERIA IN BELLE EPOQUE PARIS

Michael Nevins, MD



In November 1882, the French medical community was informed of a new series of lectures that would be conducted every Tuesday morning at *La Salpetriere* hospital by Professor Jean-Martin Charcot. These so-called *Leçons du Mardi* (Tuesday Lessons) promised “to simulate all the surprises, all the complexity of clinical practice.”

Two centuries earlier (1656), King Louis XIV had ordered all the beggars and madmen of Paris to be placed in eight large *hopitals* – evidently the sight of vagabonds on the streets reduced the Sun King’s radiance. The largest, *La Salpetriere*, exclusively for women, was located on the former site of an arsenal which explains the odd name since saltpeter was used to make gun powder. Care for the ill in these facilities was secondary to their role as storage places for the deranged, demented and criminal - the dregs of society. The inmates were co-mingled in dank, rat-infested quarters; the wild ones chained like animals, the lucky ones sent to Louisiana to help populate “New France.”

By the time of the Revolution, *La Salpetriere*, (then called “The National Home For Women”) had more than 100 buildings and over 5,000 inhabitants. In September 1792 a mob stormed the place, slit the throats of 35 prostitutes and raped hundreds of women and girls. But early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century things began to improve under the humane leadership of Dr. Phillippe Pinel. He unchained the most violent inmates, introduced “moral treatment” and before subjecting unstable women to cold baths permitted them time to release their “tumultuous excitement” through such outlets as knitting, laundering or music.

Now fast forward to 1862 when 37 year-old Jean-Martin Charcot was appointed director of *La Salpetriere*’s medical unit. That same year among the officially recorded causes of death for women at the hospital were: “debauchery, blows and wounds, masturbation, bad reading habits, nostalgia and misery.” Such was the state of medicine when young Dr. Charcot arrived. Others would have

shunned such an appointment, but Charcot had interned there and saw opportunity at what he called this “emporium of human misery,” this “wilderness of paralysis, spasms and convulsions,” “this living museum of pathology.”

During three decades at *La Salpetriere*, until his death in 1893, Charcot transformed the dismal place into a research center and teaching hospital and, in the process, he achieved international fame. His hundreds of publications were widely read and more than a dozen eponyms cited his name: Charcot’s triad (in fact, two of them, one for multiple sclerosis, the other for cholangitis), Charcot joint (neuropathic arthropathy), Charcot foot, Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease, Charcot’s Disease (what we now call “Lou Gehrig’s Disease”.) Although his interests spanned the entire field of internal medicine, Charcot focused mainly on disorders of the nervous system that were prevalent at *La Salpetriere* – and then during his last decade, he concentrated mostly on the bizarre condition popularly known as “hysteria.”

Since ancient times this wastebasket of symptoms was linked to the uterus – so said Plato, Hippocrates and Galen. Nervousness, convulsions, contortions, paralysis, anesthesia, frigidity, nymphomania – anything that could be lumped together as “female troubles” fit the stereotype. The choking sensation known as *globus hystericus* was blamed on a wandering womb that had migrated up to the throat. Pinel believed that hysteria usually was due to sexual deprivation for which he prescribed either vigorous exercise -- or more frequent intercourse. However Charcot had mixed feelings about a uterine or ovarian role and gradually came to believe that hysteria was due to a pathologic brain condition.

In 1881 Charcot spoke at a medical exposition in London that was attended by some 3,000 delegates, including Pasteur, Jenner, Koch, Virchow and Lister. But it was Charcot’s light which shined brightest – literally. That’s because a simulated portrait of his face lit London’s sky in a giant fireworks display. When he returned to Paris in triumph, Charcot was appointed full professor of

neurology – the first such academic position anywhere – and wealthy patients and royalty flocked to his elegant home-office on Blvd. Saint Germaine for consultation.

Young physicians were eager to study with Charcot and among thirty-two chief residents who served under him were Joseph Babinski, he of the great toe sign, and George Albert Edward Brutus Giles de la Tourette who during his residency described nine patients with *maladie des tics* -- what today we incorrectly call “Tourette’s Syndrome.” Incorrect, because his last name consisted of all four words: Giles de la Tourette.

During the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries hundreds of American medical students flocked to Paris to supplement their training. The French educational method featured bedside teaching and although few Americans could understand the lectures, cadavers were plentiful on which they could practice their surgical skills; also, housing was inexpensive and the permissive French life-style was a revelation.

Americans weren’t the only visitors to *La Salpetriere*, young doctors came from all over Europe, as if drawn by a magnet. For nearly four months during the winter of 1885, 29 year old Sigmund Freud studied with Charcot and although he came to study neuropathology, it was a transformative experience – so profound that four years later Freud named his newborn son after the man whom he called “my master.” In Freud’s words, Charcot was “tremendously stimulating, almost exciting...one of the greatest physicians and a man whose common sense is the order of genius...He engrosses me, my brain is sated...no other human being has affected me in such a way...I walk away as from Notre Dame, with a new perspective of perfection.” During his time in Paris, Freud was abusing cocaine and wrote to his fiancée that when he was first invited to attend one of the lavish soirees held every week at Charcot’s home, he was so awe-struck that before going out, he took an extra dose in order “to loosen my tongue.”

Charcot's greatest attribute was his eagle eye. As Freud recalled, "he was not a reflective man, not a thinker; he had the nature of an artist" – he was a *visuel*, a man who sees. His research always was based on clinical and anatomical correlations, an approach which had come into vogue in Paris earlier in the century, but in a sense, Charcot's obsession with detail also was his greatest flaw. Distrusting mere theory, he needed proof and if he couldn't actually see an organic abnormality, he'd describe the condition as being "dynamic" or "functional." He'd successfully established precise morphology of such other neurologic conditions as paralysis agitans, tabes dorsalis, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and multiple sclerosis, but when Charcot performed post-mortem examinations on the hysterics, there were no detectable abnormalities. The symptoms were real enough, but they seemed to have no location – if not the uterus, where?

During the 1880s Charcot bestrode the medical world like a colossus, and *La Salpetriere* was his empire. Sometimes he was compared to Napoleon or Julius Caesar -- or to Dante in Hell -- and he didn't object. In fact, he was fond of handing out autographed photos of himself standing Napoleon-like with his hand thrust inside his vest. Freud treasured one of them. There also was a hint of Greek *hubris* which was most evident during the *Leçons du Mardi* where Charcot examined live patients.

Let's imagine that we're entering *La Salpetriere's* 600 seat amphitheater that was built to accommodate the crowds who clamored to attend – not only physicians, but journalists, theater people, artists, socialites. Every Tuesday morning their carriages clogged the streets of the Left Bank. Something exciting would be going on in this house of horrors, something theatrical or circus-like; there even was a hint of scandal. They came to watch the great professor open his living museum and display his prize specimens.

At the stroke of 10, Charcot would sweep in followed by an entourage of interns who referred to him as *le patron*. He was in full command speaking slowly and clearly but not eloquently. The lectures/performances were carefully scripted – Freud described each of them as “a little work of art.” He used props to make his points: photographs, plaster models, chalk diagrams on large blackboards. A medical illustrator drew the proceedings, a resident transcribed the master’s words for publication.

But the most important props were the patients themselves. Like marionettes, they were put through their paces by their master puppeteer. They’d been carefully selected by the residents to illustrate that day’s lesson which during the 1880s most often concerned the clinical aspects of hysteria. After hypnotizing the women, the professor either induced or aborted the classic symptoms by pressing on their so-called “hysterogenic zones” which were conveniently drawn on their torsos. He’d usually squeeze their bellies using a vice-like “ovary compressor.” Although he reported occasional cases of hysteria in men, he insisted that in them the inciting cause was some external trauma, like a fire or accident while in women it was due to something intrinsic - a feminine mystique.

For all of his sophistication, Charcot was a man of his misogynist time when women’s emotional behavior seemed inexplicable to men, especially their clamoring for more rights and to be taken seriously. One doctor estimated that one quarter of the women of Paris were hysterics and many doctors had a paternalistic feeling that they had to protect the weaker sex from their own foolish instincts.

Earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Continent had been filled with pretenders who claimed to have improved on the experiments of Dr. Franz Mesmer who had caused a sensation among high society during the 1780s, just as Charcot would a century later. But Mesmer’s theory of “animal magnetism” (a universal fluid which effected health and behavior) was discredited by a royal commission

headed by Benjamin Franklin. Employing placebo controlled studies (the first of their kind) they concluded that Mesmer's fashionable group healings, in which women sat around a large fluid-filled tub, grasped iron wands and listened to soothing music for hours at a time -- "mesmerized" -- were fraudulent.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century also was a time of well-publicized religious miracles and hypnotism, electrotherapy, hydrotherapy and other fads were being promoted both by sober scientists and charlatans. Mesmer and his followers had given hypnosis a bad name, but now the famous Professor Charcot was insisting -- not only that it was genuine, but that it was an essential diagnostic tool. To his mind, only true hysterics could be hypnotized, indeed they had an inherited predisposition which could be unmasked by hypnosis. To his credit, Charcot wasn't interested in therapeutic miracles so much as putting hysteria on a sound scientific basis. As for therapy, he had nothing special to offer, sometimes sending his private patients to electrotherapists or to Lourdes. As Giles de la Tourette would recall, "When I was Charcot's intern, how many times did I hear in the midst of a discussion of my Master's work, 'At the *Salpetriere* you cultivate hysteria, you don't cure it.' " To which Charcot would respond that before you can cure, you have to learn to recognize.

At the Tuesday lessons, Professor Charcot demonstrated what he called the "stigmata" of hysteria: paralysis, contortions, grimacing, shrieking. He had the women bark like dogs, kiss statues or partially disrobe and when he probed their bodies, they responded on cue. They'd learned their parts to perfection for if they did well, they might receive special privileges or presents from the medical residents. The young doctors also wanted to please the professor because their futures depended on his patronage. Journalists suggested that members of the house staff were having love affairs with their patients -- and probably some were.

Those divas who performed best, became celebrities and got star treatment. They were painted, sculpted and transformed into characters in operas and novels. It even became chic for society women in *belle époque* Paris to emulate their flamboyant style. The most famous of all was Blanche Wittman who was called *la reine des hysteriques* – the queen of hysterics. As a frightened teenager, she was admitted to *La Salpetriere* at about the same time that Charcot first became interested in hysteria and she acted out so convincingly that sometimes she was loaned out for display at other teaching hospitals. Even Sarah Bernhardt visited to study Blanche's virtuoso performances – some of which may have reflected addiction to ether that was used on her as a sedative.

The Tuesday morning scene was captured in a large painting done in 1887 by Andre Brouillet. It showed a near life-sized Blanche Wittman center-stage in a hypnosis-induced swoon, arched backward, fully extending into what was called *le arc du circle* while two dozen male physicians looked on, seemingly with a mix of interest and desire. Charcot aimed to demonstrate how susceptibility to suggestion was a cardinal element of hysteria, but critics complained that he was exploiting the women – that the Tuesday lessons were nothing more than a voyeuristic peepshow. After the performance the audience often would clap. Here's how one eyewitness described the Tuesday morning scene:

*So much has been written and spoken about Salpetriere that there is one name, Charcot, that arouses its own kind of sentiments. Charcot is the sovereign of the kingdom of neuroses. Everyone here relates to him with reverence, bordering on servility. And his appearance actually is as imposing as a general's....The women are treated like cannon-fodder... as if they are medical specimens and nothing more. It never crosses his mind that they might have feelings.*



Another insider's description was provided by Jane Avril, the famous cancan dancer at the Moulin Rouge who was immortalized in paintings and posters by Toulouse Lautrec. At age fourteen (1882) she'd escaped from her abusive prostitute mother, was arrested for vagrancy and sent to *La Salpetriere*. In her memoirs, written some fifty years later, Jane Avril recalled the kindness of Charcot's divas who served as surrogate mothers:

*I found myself with the stars of hysteria, an ailment which at the time was creating a sensation. The foremost medical men, the best known thinkers of the entire world came in droves to attend the courses presided over by the master and to witness the demonstrations and experiments on his most famous subjects. They were deranged girls whose ailments named Hysteria consisted, above all, in simulation of it. How much trouble they used to go to in order to capture attention and gain stardom...The prize went to the one who would find something needed to overshadow the others when Charcot, followed by a large group of students, stood at the bedside and observed their wild contortions, various acrobatics and other gymnastics. These patients had nothing to hide from little me – I was of so little consequence – thus they didn't hesitate to let me know about what they used to call "the secret."*

Jane Avril stayed at *La Salpetriere* for eighteen months and just before discharge, she attended the annual masquerade ball which was called *La Bal de Folles* – the Madwomen's Ball. That night Jane was a sensation, kicking up her heels and gesticulating wildly. As soon as she was released, she went straight to Montmartre, got a job dancing at the Moulin Rouge and became the toast of the town – and the inspiration of Toulouse Lautrec.

Sigmund Freud recalled how at one of the soirees held at Charcot's home, he'd overheard the master explain to someone – *C'est toujours la chose genital, toujours, toujours, toujours*. When he heard this, Freud said "I was paralyzed with

astonishment” and, of course, it profoundly influenced his ideas. In Paris Freud came to appreciate that physical signs and symptoms could have a psychological basis and that repressed sexual events could be the basis of neuroses – he expanded on these ideas for the next fifty years. After his winter in Paris, Freud corresponded with Charcot about translations into German that he did of some of the lectures. In a letter written four years before his death, the professor wrote, “Mon Cher Docteur Freud...rest assured, hysteria is coming along and one day it will occupy gloriously the important place it deserves in the sun.” But he was mistaken.

Charcot was a heavy cigar smoker and a gourmand and died of heart failure in 1893 at age 68. Once he was gone, the so-called “Salpetriere School” fell like a house of cards. Rivals froze his former residents out of academic appointments and the idea of hysteria being a distinct neurologic condition was dismissed. Even the prodigal son Babinski, jumped ship and publicly refuted his master’s theories. The 1880s have been described as “the Golden Age of Hysteria” and *La Salpetriere* was the epicenter, but the Golden Age was short-lived. Twenty years before Charcot arrived, only 1% of the hospital’s inmates carried this diagnosis; during his heyday 17% did -- and twenty years after he died there were none. Charcot’s former colleagues and students raised money to build a large bronze statue of him. Contributions came from all over the world and when completed, it was placed in the hospital’s entrance. A half century later when the Nazis captured Paris, the statue was torn down and melted for scrap metal.

During World War I, there was a flurry of renewed interest in hysteria when thousands of soldiers suffered from what we now would call post-traumatic stress disorder. But then discussion of the condition faded away again. Indeed it didn’t really disappear, but was re-conceptualized with new terms employed, such as conversion reaction. Scientists came to believe that there wasn’t a single explanation, that there could be various causes of hysteric symptoms, that one-size doesn’t fit all.

Before Jean-Martin Charcot, few internists or even alienists (asylum psychologists) were interested in hysteria. In 1891 alone Charcot consulted on more than 3,000 patients; of 1,913 new ones, 806 were diagnosed as hysteria or neurosis. He published over 450 articles, more than a quarter of them about hysteria and was among the first to emphasize that the problem was related to the brain rather than to the ovaries or uterus. Although Charcot always claimed that he was not interested in mental medicine, he stimulated the development of a scientific approach to nervous system conditions and in his last years his ideas seem to have evolved. He once told his secretary that some of his theories needed to be revised and he certainly opened the door for protégés like Freud and Janet to move toward psychological more than organic explanations for the perplexing symptoms.

Although Charcot theories about the nature of hysteria were short-lived in scientific circles, not so in the public mind. Several months after his death, a French author George Du Maurier published a novel called *Trilby* that became an instant sensation. In the United States; 200,000 copies were sold in the first year and it was the first best-seller in publishing history. The book's heroine Trilby was a poor artist's model who suffered from migraine headaches. She sought help from a disreputable musician named Svengali and under his hypnotic gaze the attacks were cured -- and the previously tone-deaf girl found her voice and was transformed into an opera star. The novel's phenomenal success was called "Trilby-mania" and when in an English production the heroine wore a short-brimmed fedora hat it became instantly fashionable and still is referred to as a Trilby. In 1910 a variation on the same theme of male dominance appeared in a novel written by Gaston LeRoux called *The Phantom of the Opera* and the rest is literary and theatrical history.

You may wonder what became of Blanche Wittman? After her master's death, she was out of a job and apparently never had another hysterical fit. She was discharged from *La Salpetriere*, but found work in the hospital's new radiology

laboratory. At the time, nothing was known about the hazards of radiation and she seems to have developed tissue necrosis and required multiple amputations. Blanche always maintained that she'd never deliberately tricked either the professor or the audiences although she agreed that others may have tried. She insisted that Charcot was too clever to be fooled.

Even today, Charcot's enigmatic personality continues to fascinate and inspires people to imagine provocative scenarios. In 2004 Swedish novelist Per Enquist published a book called *The Story of Blanche and Marie*. According to the novelist, after being discharged from *La Salpetriere*, Blanche became Marie Curie's assistant and close friend and they worked side by side up to their elbows in pitchblend and later when Blanche became a triple amputee, she lived in Marie's house. The plot gets more bizarre suggesting that Charcot and Blanche were secret lovers - and that she murdered him!

National Geographic Magazine began publishing in 1888, four years before Charcot died, but didn't photograph its first bare-breasted Zulu woman until 1898. Erotic French postcards came along several years later. But before all of that, photographs of Charcot's divas were published in three thick books that were sold throughout the world. Scantly dressed, they acted out their classic poses – all very exciting to the male mind. The most celebrated of the photo models was a teenager known only as Augustine who had been admitted to *La Salpetriere* at age 15 with seizures and paralysis. She'd been sexually abused as a young adolescent and was described as flirtatious and loving to be the center of attention. Younger and prettier than Blanche Wittman, Augustine could produce whatever the maestro suggested; she was perfect for the photography books and received special attention. But after five years as a photo object of desire, she disguised herself in male clothing, escaped and was never seen again.

In May 2013 a French movie called *Augustine* imagined an erotic tension between Charcot and Augustine – just like the Swedish novelist had a few years

earlier between Charcot and Blanche. The part of Augustine in the movie was played by a sultry French actress and the story climaxed (literally) with a torrid sex scene between doctor and patient. In real life there wasn't a shred of evidence of any impropriety on the professor's part, but fantasy about what might have happened is timeless – and sells tickets and books. The *NY Times* reviewer described the film as “a Gothic Love Story” and suggested that Charcot was “at once a charlatan and a pioneer, a monster and a modernizer.”

Modern medicine no longer talks about hysteria but despite our diagnostic technology, we still lack a biologic explanation for such conditions as anorexia nervosa, bulimia, chronic fatigue syndrome and other disorders that predominantly seem to afflict women. *Plus ca change; plus c'est la meme chose*. It's ironic that in our own day, Freud's influence has waned just as Charcot's had a century ago. Now we often think of behavioral problems as being due to chemical imbalance and perhaps some day by using sophisticated brain scanners we'll be able to document what Charcot couldn't see through his light microscope -- if so, Charcot will be smiling in his grave.

The venerable *Salpetriere hospital* has come a long way -- from 17<sup>th</sup> century arsenal where gunpowder was made to destroy people, to poorhouse and prison, to the asylum where Pinel unshackled the mentally ill and then to Charcot's circus. Today it's a modern medical center dedicated to healing both minds and bodies. When Princess Diana was fatally injured in an auto accident in 1997, she was rushed to the Salpetriere-Pitié's emergency room where she died. In 1960 a French stamp was belatedly issued to honor the man who some called “the father of neurology.” The paths of glory lead but to the grave – in Jean-Martin Charcot's case, to his wife's family tomb in the Montmartre Cemetery. *Sic Transit Gloria Mundi*. Thus passes the glory of the world.

Michael Nevins, MD