

## **M0006353: "The Discoverer of Mesmerism"**

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## FRIEDERICH ANTON MESMER

# The DISCOVERER of MESMERISM

## Was Accused of Selling His Soul to the Devil

ABOUT the year 1771, Father Hell, a Jesuit and Professor of Astronomy at the University of Vienna, invented some steel plates which, when applied to the naked body, were supposed to cure diseases.

Two years later he communicated his discovery to Friedrich Anton Mesmer, an Austrian doctor.

Both men had been working independently on the theory of magnetism, and

quarrel that ensued. In the end Hell won.

Mesmer, nevertheless, continued his researches. In time he discovered that the metal plates were unnecessary. By merely passing his hands down a patient he could produce a similar result.

He wrote an account of his discovery to all the learned societies in Europe, asking them to investigate his work. Hell was now scorned.

But Mesmer waited in vain for favourable replies from the societies. Only one replied—the Academy of Sciences at Berlin—who turned him down flat.

Hell was again in the ascendant, and Mesmer left Vienna, determined to change his sphere of action.

He went to Switzerland, where he met the celebrated Father Gassner, who had amused himself for some time by "casting out devils." Gassner's house was daily filled with the halt, the lame and the blind.

Mesmer at once acknowledged the power of Gassner. Whereupon the priest allowed the magnetist to experiment on some of his patients. Mesmer then attended some paupers in the hospitals of Berne. Having, according to his own declaration, met with remarkable success, he returned to Vienna.

His activities in that city were no more auspicious than before.

He treated a Mademoiselle Paradis for blindness and convulsions. After magnetising her several times, he declared she was cured. But neither Mademoiselle nor her doctor could see any change.

Mesmer insisted that she was cured; and, if she were not, it was her own fault. The magnetist now declared that the girl was feigning blindness to discredit him.

Once more Mesmer left Vienna.

Paris was a different proposition. He arrived there a few years before the Revolution, when Parisians, and particularly Parisiennes, were ready to investigate any novelty. At first people were inclined to laugh; but Mesmer hired a sumptuous apartment and offered his services to all-comers free of charge.

His first convert was D'Esion, a physician of great reputation. From that moment animal magnetism became the craze of Paris. Women packed his consulting rooms. Some who thought they had diseases were cured. Some who had diseases thought they were cured.

Monsieur Mesmer was a clever showman. No house in Paris was so beautifully furnished as his. The windows were of richly stained glass, and they shed varied colours into the rooms. The air was scented with orange-blossom and incense. There was the distant music of æolian harps, and sometimes a beautiful female voice would sing dreamy songs.

It was pleasant excitement for the social world of Paris, for Mesmer practised his cures before any of his patrons who cared to watch.



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In the centre of his operating room was an oval vessel, four feet long and a foot in width. In this were a number of wine-bottles, well corked, and containing magnetised water. Water was poured into the vessel to cover the bottles, and iron filings thrown in. The whole was then covered with an iron cover, pierced with many holes. A long movable rod of iron issued from the holes.

The patients sat round the contraption and touched their bodies with the rods. Then assistant magnetisers came in—all of them were handsome, strapping young men—and fixed the patients with their eyes, gently massaging their limbs.

Soon the women went into convulsive fits. Some tore their hair, others became insensible after hysteria. While this was going on Mesmer appeared, dressed in a lilac-coloured silk robe, and bearing in his hand a magnetic rod. Ponderously he waved his wand and the women returned to sanity.

The sensation created in Paris by Mesmer's activities was enormous. Those who denied his discoveries called him a quack or a fool. The Church took a hand and declared that he had sold himself to the devil. When Marie Antoinette announced her belief in the magnetist, the crowds at his consulting rooms were doubled.

Paris was equally divided for and against Mesmer, but his enemies were louder in their condemnation.

He wrote to Marie Antoinette asking for the protection of the Government. He suggested that a chateau and lands should be given to him so that he might carry on his experiments unmolested. In the event of a refusal he would be obliged to carry his "great discovery" to some other country.

"In the eyes of your majesty," said he, "four or five hundred thousand francs, applied to a good purpose are of no account. The welfare and happiness of your people are everything. My discovery ought to be received and rewarded with a munificence

## TO-DAY IN HISTORY

By  
Claud Golding

worthy of the monarch to whom I shall attach myself."

At length the Government offered him twenty thousand francs and the order of St. Michael if he could prove to the King's physicians that he had made any discovery in medicine. Mesmer would not agree. He was certain of an unfavourable report from these men.

Thereupon he left Paris in disgust and went to Spa, ostensibly to drink the waters for the benefit of his health.

While he was away D'Esion was approached by the Faculty of Medicine and asked to demonstrate some new discoveries in magnetism which he claimed for himself.

The experiments lasted five months. Hearing of them, Mesmer returned to Paris and continued his practices.

At last the commissioners published their report. They declared that the only proof in support of animal magnetism was the effect it produced on the human body. But, they declared, exactly the same results could be obtained without passes or magnetic manipulation. In short, it was all imagination.

Mesmer now quitted France with a fortune of 340,000 francs and retired to Switzerland, where he died in 1815 at the advanced age of 81.

The most distinguished of his disciples was the Marquis de Puységur, but many others made fortunes out of magnetism. One who practised in England in the closing years of the 18th century was Dr. Mainau-duc, who established himself in Bristol.

Of him Hannah More wrote to Horace Walpole in September 1788, referring to his "demoniacal mummeries," and adding that he was in a fair way of gaining a hundred thousand pounds by them, as Mesmer had done in his exhibitions in Paris.