Ambroise-Auguste Liébeault, The Father of Nancy's School of Hypnotism During the 19th Century: Part II



By Brice Lemaire

Brice Lemaire, PhD, is a dental surgeon and private practitioner with a passion for medical hypnosis. As a renowned author, speaker, and trainer, he established the postgraduate program in Dental Hypnosis at the University of Nice and founded both the Dave Elman Hypnosis Institute France and the French Society of Dental Hypnosis.

Continued from Summer issue 2026

Regarding a visit to the school in Nancy, Dr. Delbœuf describes: "It is a long tunnel, two and a half meters wide by seven to eight meters long, divided into two unequal parts by a simple partition." The furnishings were extremely simple: wooden benches, iron chairs, a tiny sofa, a stuffed armchair, a small table in the corner with a ledger, a few illuminations, a map of France, a modest bookcase at the back, and on the edge a bottle of champagne with the label: "Magnetized Water."

After asking the patient, if necessary, what he was suffering from, without conducting any examination whatsoever, he had him sit down, placed his hand on his forehead, and without even looking at him, said, "You are going to sleep"; then, almost immediately, he closed his eyelids, assuring him that he was asleep. He raised his arm and said, "You can no longer lower your arm." If he lowered it, Mr. Liébeault didn't even seem to notice. He then had him rotate his arms, assuring him that the movement could not be stopped; As he says this, he himself vigorously turns his own arms, the patient still keeping his eyes closed; and he speaks, he speaks incessantly in a loud, vibrant voice. Then the suggestions begin: "You will be cured; your digestion will be good; your sleep will be good; you will no longer cough; your circulation will be free and regular; you will feel much strength in your limbs; you will walk with ease; etc." He hardly varies this refrain. He thus addresses all illnesses at once; it is up to the client to recognize his own.

Another doctor, Dr. van Renterghem, wrote: "Liébeault received between twenty–five and forty patients every morning in an old shed with whitewashed walls and a floor paved with large flat stones. He treated his patients in public, without worrying about the noise. Liébeault hypnotized his patients by telling them to look him in the eyes and repeating that they were becoming increasingly sleepy. As soon as the patient was slightly hypnotized, Liébeault assured him that his symptoms had disappeared. Most of the patients were poor people from the town and peasants from the surrounding area, whom he treated indiscriminately with the same method, whatever their illness: arthritis, ulcers, jaundice, or pulmonary tuberculosis." Liébeault devoted the last forty years of his life to treating thousands of patients in this way. Some days, he received more than one hundred patients a day. Each person gives what they can in exchange for this excellent care, and they can return whenever they like without an appointment.

Bernheim learns and understands Liébeault's hypnosis and uses his technique at the Nancy hospital with astonishing results. Together, they participate in the founding of the Nancy School with the jurist Jules Liégeois and the physiologist Henri Beaunis: this is the "golden age" of hypnosis in France, which lasts ten years (1882–1892).

Bernheim continued his research; he gradually abandoned hypnosis, maintaining that its effects could be obtained just as easily in the waking state as through suggestion, using a method he called "psychotherapy." In 1907, he proposed the concept of "ideo–dynamism," according to which "every suggested idea tends to become an action." Liébeault remained attached to the notion of trance, of sleep in his terminology, associated with suggestion, and he distanced himself from Bernheim, who stated in London in 1892: "There is no hypnotism, there is only suggestion." In 1890, when Liébeault announced his intention to retire from his medical practice, an international group of sixty doctors decided to publish a photo album of themselves as a tribute. Liébeault died in 1904 at the age of eighty. He is a philanthropist, a benefactor of humanity through the thousands of healings he performs almost free of charge and through his major contribution to the evolution of the practice and understanding of hypnosis. One must undoubtedly revisit his work, *On Sleep and Similar States*, to grasp all the insights he has gained while treating his patients daily. And beyond his practice, one can appreciate the great humility he demonstrates throughout his life, in our time when many use hypnosis for themselves, for financial or egotistical purposes, but few use hypnosis to advance it.

Liébeault's Induction

"Think about sleep... your eyes are tired... your eyelids are heavy... they droop... your eyelids grow heavier and will become heavier and heavier... your arms are heavy... your head is heavy... you fall asleep... think about sleep... sleep... sleep deeply."



