

Sigmund Freud

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Katharina, Case Histories from Studies on Hysteria

Sigmund Freud ⓘ

Case 4

Katharina —

In the summer vacation of the year 189- I made an excursion into the Hohe Tauern¹ so that for a while I might forget medicine and more particularly the neuroses. I had almost succeeded in this when one day I turned aside from the main road to climb a mountain which lay somewhat apart and which was renowned for its views and for its well-run refuge hut. I reached the top after a strenuous climb and, feeling refreshed and rested, was sitting deep in contemplation of the charm of the distant prospect. I was so lost in thought that at first I did not connect it with myself when these words reached my ears: 'Are you a doctor, sir?' But the question was addressed to me, and by the rather sulky-looking girl of perhaps eighteen who had served my meal and had been spoken to by the landlady as 'Katharina'. To judge by her dress and bearing, she could not be a servant, but must no doubt be a daughter or relative of the landlady's.

Coming to myself I replied: 'Yes, I'm a doctor: but-how did you know that?'

'You wrote your name in the Visitors' Book, sir. And I thought if you had a few moments to spare... The truth is, sir, my nerves are bad. I went to see a doctor in L—about them and he gave me something for them; but I'm not well yet.'

So there I was with the neuroses once again—for nothing else could very well be the matter with this strong, well-built girl with her unhappy look. I was interested to find that neuroses could flourish in this way at a height of over 6,000 feet; I questioned her further therefore. I report the conversation that followed between us just as it is impressed on my memory and I have not altered the patient's dialect.²

'Well, what is it you suffer from?'

'I get so out of breath. Not always. But sometimes it catches me so that I think I shall suffocate.'

[^{PEP}] *This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 1, Page 184*

¹ *[One of the highest ranges in the Eastern Alps.]*

² *[No attempt has been made in the English translation to imitate this dialect.]*

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This did not, at first sight, sound like a nervous symptom. But soon it occurred to me that probably it was only a description that stood for an anxiety attack: she was choosing shortness of breath out of the complex of sensations arising from anxiety and laying undue stress on that single factor.

'Sit down here. What is it like when you get "out of breath"?'

'It comes over me all at once. First of all it's like something pressing on my eyes. My head gets so heavy, there's a dreadful buzzing, and I feel so giddy that I almost fall over. Then there's something crushing my chest so that I can't get my breath.'

'And you don't notice anything in your throat?'

'My throat's squeezed together as though I were going to choke.'

'Does anything else happen in your head?'

'Yes, there's a hammering, enough to burst it.'

'And don't you feel at all frightened while this is going on?'

'I always think I'm going to die. I'm brave as a rule and go about everywhere by myself—into the cellar and all over the mountain. But on a day when that happens I don't dare to go anywhere; I think all the time someone's standing behind me and going to catch hold of me all at once.'

So it was in fact an anxiety attack, and introduced by the signs of a hysterical 'aura'¹—or, more correctly, it was a hysterical attack the content of which was anxiety. Might there not probably be some other content as well?

'When you have an attack do you think of something? and always the same thing? or do you see something in front of you?'

'Yes. I always see an awful face that looks at me in a dreadful way, so that I'm frightened.'

Perhaps this might offer a quick means of getting to the heart of the matter.

'Do you recognize the face? I mean, is it a face that you've really seen some time?'

'No.'

'Do you know what your attacks come from?'

'No.'

'When did you first have them?'

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¹[The premonitory sensations preceding an epileptic or hysterical attack.]

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'Two years ago, while I was still living on the other mountain with my aunt. (She used to run a refuge hut there, and we moved here eighteen months ago.) But they keep on happening.'

Was I to make an attempt at an analysis? I could not venture to transplant hypnosis to these altitudes, but perhaps I might succeed with a simple talk. I should have to try a lucky guess. I had found often enough that in girls anxiety was a consequence of the horror by which a virginal mind is overcome when it is faced for the first time with the world of sexuality.¹

So I said: 'If you don't know, I'll tell you how *I* think you got your attacks. At that time, two years ago, you must have seen or heard something that very much embarrassed you, and that you'd much rather not have seen.'

'Heavens, yes!' she replied, 'that was when I caught my uncle with the girl, with Franziska, my cousin.'

'What's this story about a girl? Won't you tell me all about it?'

'You can say *anything* to a doctor, I suppose. Well, at that time, you know, my uncle—the husband of the aunt you've seen here—kept the inn on the —kogel.

² Now they're divorced, and it's my fault they were divorced, because it was through me that it came out that he was carrying on with Franziska.'

‘And how did you discover it?’

‘This way. One day two years ago some gentlemen had climbed the mountain and asked for something to eat. My aunt wasn't at home, and Franziska, who always did the cooking, was nowhere to be found. And my uncle was not to be found either. We looked everywhere, and at last Alois, the little boy, my cousin, said: “Why, Franziska must be in Father's room!”

[*PEP*] *This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 1, Page 186*

¹*I will quote here the case in which I first recognized this causal connection. I was treating a young married woman who was suffering from a complicated neurosis and, once again [cf. p. 112n.], was unwilling to admit that her illness arose from her married life. She objected that while she was still a girl she had had attacks of anxiety, ending in fainting fits. I remained firm. When we had come to know each other better she suddenly said to me one day: ‘I'll tell you now how I came by my attacks of anxiety when I was a girl. At that time I used to sleep in a room next to my parents' the door was left open and a night-light used to burn on the table. So more than once I saw my father get into bed with my mother and heard sounds that greatly excited me. It was then that my attacks came on.’—[Two cases of this kind are mentioned by Freud in a letter to Fliess of May 30, 1893 (Freud, 1950a, Letter 12). Cf. also Section II of the first paper on anxiety neurosis (1895b).]*

²*[The name of the ‘other’ mountain.]*

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And we both laughed; but we weren't thinking anything bad. Then we went to my uncle's room but found it locked. That seemed strange to me. Then Alois said: “There's a window in the passage where you can look into the room.” We went into the passage; but Alois wouldn't go to the window and said he was afraid. So I said: “You silly boy! I'll go. I'm not a bit afraid.” And I had nothing bad in my mind. I looked in. The room was rather dark, but I saw my uncle and Franziska; he was lying on her.’

‘Well?’

‘I came away from the window at once, and leant up against the wall and couldn't get my breath—just what happens to me since. Everything went blank, my eyelids were forced together and there was a hammering and buzzing in my head.’

‘Did you tell your aunt that very same day?’

'Oh no, I said nothing.'

'Then why were you so frightened when you found them together? Did you understand it? Did you know what was going on?'

'Oh no. I didn't understand anything at that time. I was only sixteen. I don't know what I was frightened about.'

'Fräulein Katharina, if you could remember now what was happening in you at that time, when you had your first attack, what you thought about it—it would help you.'

'Yes, if I could. But I was so frightened that I've forgotten everything.'

(Translated into the terminology of our 'Preliminary Communication' [p. 12], this means: 'The affect itself created a hypnoid state, whose products were then cut off from associative connection with the ego-consciousness.')

'Tell me, Fräulein. Can it be that the head that you always see when you lose your breath is Franziska's head, as you saw it then?'

'Oh no, she didn't look so awful. Besides, it's a man's head.'

'Or perhaps your uncle's?'

'I didn't see his face as clearly as that. It was too dark in the room. And why should he have been making such a dreadful face just then?'

'You're quite right.'

(The road suddenly seemed blocked. Perhaps something might turn up in the rest of her story.)

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'And what happened then?'

'Well, those two must have heard a noise, because they came out soon afterwards. I felt very bad the whole time. I always kept thinking about it. Then two days later it was a Sunday and there was a great deal to do and I worked all day long. And on the Monday morning I felt giddy again and was sick, and I stopped in bed and was sick without stopping for three days.'

We [Breuer and I] had often compared the symptomatology of hysteria with a pictographic script which has become intelligible after the discovery of a few bilingual inscriptions. In that alphabet being sick means disgust. So I said: 'If you were sick three days later, I believe that means that when you looked into the room you felt disgusted.'

'Yes, I'm sure I felt disgusted,' she said reflectively, 'but disgusted at what?'

'Perhaps you saw something naked? What sort of state were they in?'

'It was too dark to see anything; besides they both of them had their clothes on. Oh, if only I knew what it was I felt disgusted at!'

I had no idea either. But I told her to go on and tell me whatever occurred to her, in the confident expectation that she would think of precisely what I needed to explain the case.

Well, she went on to describe how at last she reported her discovery to her aunt, who found that she was changed and suspected her of concealing some secret. There followed some very disagreeable scenes between her uncle and aunt, in the course of which the children came to hear a number of things which opened their eyes in many ways and which it would have been better for them not to have heard. At last her aunt decided to move with her children and niece and take over the present inn, leaving her uncle alone with Franziska, who had meanwhile become pregnant. After this, however, to my astonishment she dropped these threads and began to tell me two sets of older stories, which went back two or three years earlier than the traumatic moment. The first set related to occasions on which the same uncle had made sexual advances to her herself, when she was only fourteen years old. She described how she had once gone with him on an expedition down into the valley in the winter and had spent the night in the inn there. He sat in the bar drinking and playing cards, but she felt

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sleepy and went up to bed early in the room they were to share on the upper floor. She was not quite asleep when he came up; then she fell asleep again and woke up suddenly 'feeling his body' in the bed. She jumped up and remonstrated with him: 'What are you up to, Uncle? Why don't you stay in your own bed?' He tried to pacify her: 'Go on, you silly girl, keep still. You don't know how nice it is.'—'I don't like your "nice" things; you don't even let one sleep in

peace.' She remained standing by the door, ready to take refuge outside in the passage, till at last he gave up and went to sleep himself. Then she went back to her own bed and slept till morning. From the way in which she reported having defended herself it seems to follow that she did not clearly recognize the attack as a sexual one. When I asked her if she knew what he was trying to do to her, she replied: 'Not at the time.' It had become clear to her much later on, she said; she had resisted because it was unpleasant to be disturbed in one's sleep and 'because it wasn't nice'.

I have been obliged to relate this in detail, because of its great importance for understanding everything that followed. —She went on to tell me of yet other experiences of somewhat later date: how she had once again had to defend herself against him in an inn when he was completely drunk, and similar stories. In answer to a question as to whether on these occasions she had felt anything resembling her later loss of breath, she answered with decision that she had every time felt the pressure on her eyes and chest, but with nothing like the strength that had characterized the scene of discovery.

Immediately she had finished this set of memories she began to tell me a second set, which dealt with occasions on which she had noticed something between her uncle and Franziska. Once the whole family had spent the night in their clothes in a hay loft and she was woken up suddenly by a noise; she thought she noticed that her uncle, who had been lying between her and Franziska, was turning away, and that Franziska was just lying down. Another time they were stopping the night at an inn at the village of N—; she and her uncle were in one room and Franziska in an adjoining one. She woke up suddenly in the night and saw a tall white figure by the door, on the point of turning the handle: 'Goodness, is that you, Uncle? What are you doing at the door?'—'Keep quiet. I was only

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looking for something.'—'But the way out's by the *other* door.' —'I'd just made a mistake' ... and so on.

I asked her if she had been suspicious at that time. 'No, I didn't think anything about it; I only just noticed it and thought no more about it.' When I enquired whether she had been frightened on these occasions too, she replied that she thought so, but she was not so sure of it this time.

At the end of these two sets of memories she came to a stop. She was like someone transformed. The sulky, unhappy face had grown lively, her eyes were bright, she was lightened and exalted. Meanwhile the understanding of her case had become clear to me. The later part of what she had told me, in an apparently aimless fashion, provided an admirable explanation of her behaviour at the scene of the discovery. At that time she had carried about with her two sets of experiences which she remembered but did not understand, and from which she drew no inferences. When she caught sight of the couple in intercourse, she at once established a connection between the new impression and these two sets of recollections, she began to understand them and at the same time to fend them off. There then followed a short period of working-out, of 'incubation',¹ after which the symptoms of conversion set in, the vomiting as a substitute for moral and physical disgust. This solved the riddle. She had not been disgusted by the sight of the two people but by the memory which that sight had stirred up in her. And, taking everything into account, this could only be the memory of the attempt on her at night when she had 'felt her uncle's body'.

So when she had finished her confession I said to her: 'I know now what it was you thought when you looked into the room. You thought: "Now he's doing with her what he wanted to do with me that night and those other times." That was what you were disgusted at, because you remembered the feeling when you woke up in the night and felt his body.'

'It may well be,' she replied, 'that that was what I was disgusted at and that that was what I thought.'

'Tell me just one thing more. You're a grown-up girl now and know all sorts of things ...'

'Yes, now I am.'

'Tell me just one thing. What part of his body was it that you felt that night?'

[^{PEP}] *This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 1, Page 191*

¹[*Cf. below, p. 134.*]

But she gave me no more definite answer. She smiled in an embarrassed way, as though she had been found out, like someone who is obliged to admit that a fundamental position has been reached where there is not much more to be said. I could imagine what the tactile sensation was which she had later learnt

to interpret. Her facial expression seemed to me to be saying that she supposed that I was right in my conjecture. But I could not penetrate further, and in any case I owed her a debt of gratitude for having made it so much easier for me to talk to her than to the prudish ladies of my city practice, who regard whatever is natural as shameful.

Thus the case was cleared up.—But stop a moment! What about the recurrent hallucination of the head, which appeared during her attacks and struck terror into her? Where did it come from? I proceeded to ask her about it, and, as though *her* knowledge, too, had been extended by our conversation, she promptly replied: ‘Yes, I know now. The head is my uncle’s head—I recognize it now—but not from *that* time. Later, when all the disputes had broken out, my uncle gave way to a senseless rage against me. He kept saying that it was all my fault: if I hadn’t chattered, it would never have come to a divorce. He kept threatening he would do something to me; and if he caught sight of me at a distance his face would get distorted with rage and he would make for me with his hand raised. I always ran away from him, and always felt terrified that he would catch me some time unawares. The face I always see now is his face when he was in a rage.’

This information reminded me that her first hysterical symptom, the vomiting, had passed away; the anxiety attack remained and acquired a fresh content. Accordingly, what we were dealing with was a hysteria which had to a considerable extent been abreacted. And in fact she had reported her discovery to her aunt soon after it happened.

‘Did you tell your aunt the other stories—about his making advances to you?’

‘Yes. Not at once, but later on, when there was already talk of a divorce. My aunt said: “We’ll keep that in reserve. If he causes trouble in the Court, we’ll say that too.”’

I can well understand that it should have been precisely this last period—when there were more and more agitating scenes in the house and when her own state ceased to interest her aunt,

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who was entirely occupied with the dispute—that it should have been this period of accumulation and retention that left her the legacy of the mnemonic symbol [of the hallucinated face].

I hope this girl, whose sexual sensibility had been injured at such an early age, derived some benefit from our conversation. I have not seen her since.

Discussion

If someone were to assert that the present case history is not so much an analysed case of hysteria as a case solved by guessing, I should have nothing to say against him. It is true that the patient agreed that what I interpolated into her story was probably true; but she was not in a position to recognize it as something she had experienced. I believe it would have required hypnosis to bring that about. Assuming that my guesses were correct, I will now attempt to fit the case into the schematic picture of an 'acquired' hysteria on the lines suggested by Case 3. It seems plausible, then, to compare the two sets of erotic experiences with 'traumatic' moments and the scene of discovering the couple with an 'auxiliary' moment. [Cf. p. 123f.] The similarity lies in the fact that in the former experiences an element of consciousness was created which was excluded from the thought-activity of the ego and remained, as it were, in storage, while in the latter scene a new impression forcibly brought about an associative connection between this separated group and the ego. On the other hand there are dissimilarities which cannot be overlooked. The cause of the isolation was not, as in Case 3, an act of will on the part of the ego but *ignorance* on the part of the ego, which was not yet capable of coping with sexual experiences. In this respect the case of Katharina is typical. In every analysis of a case of hysteria based on sexual traumas we find that impressions from the pre-sexual period which produced no effect on the child attain traumatic power at a later date as memories, when the girl or married woman has acquired an understanding of sexual life.¹ The splitting-off

[^{PEP}] *This page can be read in German in GESAMMELTE WERKE Vol 1, Page 193*

¹[Freud had discussed this at considerable length in the later sections of Part II of his 1895 'Project' (Freud, 1950a) and expressed the same view in Section I of his second paper on 'The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence' (1896b), Standard E., 3, 166-7 n. It was not until some years later that he came to recognize the part played in the production of neuroses by sexual impulses already present in early childhood. Cf. the Editor's Note to the Three Essays (1905d), Standard Ed., 7, 127-9.]]

of psychical groups may be said to be a normal process in adolescent development; and it is easy to see that their later reception into the ego affords frequent opportunities for psychical disturbances. Moreover, I should like at this point to express a doubt as to whether a splitting of consciousness due to ignorance is really different from one due to conscious rejection, and whether even adolescents do not possess sexual knowledge far oftener than is supposed or than they themselves believe.

A further distinction in the psychical mechanism of this case lies in the fact that the scene of discovery, which we have described as 'auxiliary', deserves equally to be called 'traumatic'. It was operative on account of its own content and not merely as something that revived previous traumatic experiences. It combined the characteristics of an 'auxiliary' and a 'traumatic' moment. There seems no reason, however, why this coincidence should lead us to abandon a conceptual separation which in other cases corresponds also to a separation in time. Another peculiarity of Katharina's case, which, incidentally, has long been familiar to us, is seen in the circumstance that the conversion, the production of the hysterical phenomena, did not occur immediately after the trauma but after an interval of incubation. Charcot liked to describe this interval as the 'period of psychical working-out' [*élaboration*].¹

The anxiety from which Katharina suffered in her attacks was a hysterical one; that is, it was a reproduction of the anxiety which had appeared in connection with each of the sexual traumas. I shall not here comment on the fact which I have found regularly present in a very large number of cases —namely that a mere suspicion of sexual relations calls up the affect of anxiety in virginal individuals.² [Cf. p. 127, n. 1.]

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¹[See Charcot 1888, 1, 99. Cf. also Breuer's remarks on the subject on p. 213 below.]

²[Footnote added 1924:] *I venture after the lapse of so many years to lift the veil of discretion and reveal the fact that Katharina was not the niece but the daughter of the landlady. The girl fell ill, therefore, as a result of sexual attempts on the part of her own father. Distortions like the one which I introduced in the present instance should be altogether avoided in reporting a case history. From the point of view of understanding the case, a distortion of this kind is not, of course, a matter of such indifference as would be shifting the scene from one mountain to another.*

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