



Mrs. Pat Campbell as Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion*. The Library of Congress, part of the Bain Collection [1913-1915].

Act I

“Nothing in Nature is more certain than the fact that no single thing or event can stand alone. It is attached to all that has gone before it, and it will remain attached to all that will follow it. It was born of some cause, and so it must be followed by some effect in an endless chain.” —*Julian P. Johnson*

Mrs. Patrick Campbell listened intently to every word. She closed her eyes at times, mesmerized by the charming Irish lilt of the man reading a play to her. The more he expressed each line, the more entranced she became.

The man was George Bernard Shaw and the play he was reading was his own. He had asked the popular London actress known to everyone as Mrs. Pat to hear it. The two knew each other. Recently, they had been exchanging letters and she had teasingly told him she did not care much for his work. Now he was in her drawing room.

“That’s not a nice sound, Mr. Shaw,” she interrupted after he read one of the lines. He repeated it again, a deep cockney drawl that hardly sounded like English at all.

“Ah-ah-ah-ow-oo” is how she had heard it.

Just days before, Shaw had been told by George Alexander, Mrs. Pat’s manager, that portraying Eliza Doolittle, the young flower

girl in Shaw's new play *Pygmalion*, might be a stretch for Mrs. Pat. For one thing, she was too old.

Shaw had no such reservations. In fact, he had expressively written the play for Mrs. Pat. Shaw believed only a veteran actress could pull off the critical balance needed in scenes with a domineering male lead, in this case a linguistics professor attempting to teach a Cockney flower girl how to be a proper, high society lady.

Alexander was adamant. He graciously offered to pay another actress of Shaw's choosing to take the lead instead. Shaw rejected his notion and went directly to Mrs. Pat. "Ah-ah-ah-ow-oo," Shaw said again, just so she had heard the line correctly.

She repeated the line and asked: "You don't think I'm too ripe to play this role at forty-five, do you Mr. Shaw?"

He corrected her. "You mean at fifty?"

Mrs. Pat smiled sheepishly.

Shaw knew he had his Eliza.

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More picturesque than fatal

Part of the charms afforded to those who attended the 1867 Paris World's Fair, known as the second L'Exposition Universelle, was not just the many wonders they could behold on the ground, but the sights they experienced when they looked up as well. While most buildings, including the circular-shaped and nearly mile-long-in circumference Main Hall, were no more than a few stories tall, the English Lighthouse, for example, stood at nearly fifty meters in height and boasted an open, steel grid-work design that one unimpressed French writer described as an eyesore that "dishonors the Champ de Mars with its fleshy skeleton."

Opinion aside, the lighthouse, with its sloping base and cupola top, was a pattern by which architect Gustave Eiffel would give the city its symbolic footprint years later with a massive wrought-iron tower that stood three hundred meters in height and was large enough to support a hydraulic lift that brought tourists up and down from the top without a single step. This "elevator," as it was called, was just one invention among many that were showcased at the fair.

But for those lucky enough to be at the fair when the wind was blowing just right, looking upward might mean seeing a large balloon soaring overhead, casting a long moving shadow on the proceedings below. "[The balloon] which I declare beforehand, with

out fear of contradiction, shall be the most beautiful spectacle which has ever been given to mankind to speculate,” is how it was promoted by its creator, Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, the premier French balloonist of his time. Better known as Félix Nadar, or Nadar for short, a name he self-appointed after one of his inventions called “Nadar” just looked good as a billboard promoting himself.

Born in 1820, Nadar’s early adult life as a printmaker in turn morphed into a career as a commercial artist. His widely exaggerated illustrations of popular artists, writers, actors, and musicians of the day appeared in many of Paris’s journals, magazines, and newspapers. However once he concocted the idea to combine his caricatures into a mosaic piece, print them on one sheet, and sell them as posters, the result became so popular that Nadar the brand became synonymous with his work.

Then he found photography.

“Photography is a marvelous discovery,” he wrote in imitable fashion, “a science that engages the most elevated intellects, an art that sharpens the wits of the wisest souls—and the practical application of which lies within capacity of the shallowest imbecile.”

Though Nadar wanted to make pictures he could sell, he also hoped to find better and more efficient ways to take them. He began to experiment and soon patented several new inventions including an automatic “sliding lens shutter,” which sped up the exposure time. Nadar opened a photography studio in Paris and instead of penciling drawings of the city’s greatest celebrities, this time he began shooting those same stars on film in his studio.

This is where the balloons came in. Until then, landscape pictures could only be taken from ground level or from heights reachable by climbing. What if, Nadar wondered, he could take them from the air as well? There were a few obstacles to this theory that needed to be addressed, not the least of which was how to get a camera as high as the clouds. To Nadar, there was an obvious solution to this conundrum: balloons.

So Nadar became a balloonist.

Bigger and better was always Nadar’s way of forging ahead. So he started to envision ballooning itself as a revenue source, not just



Felix Nadar in a balloon gondola. Studio portrait, public domain [1863].

as a means to get better photographs, but also as a means of travel too. A balloon or something close to it could be used as transport, he thought, rather than just an observation post. People and commerce, even the mail, could be moved much quicker by a balloon.

Here Nadar had some basic aeronautic principles already solved: the gas balloon was lighter than air and therefore could rise and stay aloft. But with no human way to control it, how far could it travel? To date, attempts to stretch the limitations of an untethered and manned balloon had been sketchy in both Europe and America. Considering the amount of time it would take before a flying machine, even a dirigible, equipped with a good navigation system and steering was realized, Nadar's thinking was revolutionary.

To try, though, now that was the spirit!

Naming it appropriately *Le Géant*, Nadar unveiled his balloon. It was as much to prove at least that a balloon could carry more than just a few people at a time. Ultimately, and not surprisingly, the controllability issue would be its downfall, but not without Nadar, as befitting his style, launched it to great fanfare on October 4, 1863.

As for the balloon itself, its massive size was one wonder; the other was the basket, now more like a gondola with wickerwork walls that resembled a small house complete with patricians inside and windows for viewing. On top was an open-aired sundeck.

Fifteen intrepid souls went on board that day; all fifteen got back on the ground safely. Initially, Nadar asked that no women or children go on the flight, but at the last minute he succumbed to the charms of a young aristocratic lady and granted her wish to come along. Each patron paid a thousand francs for the privilege. While the inaugural flight was five hours long, shorter than planned, an encouraged Nadar quickly readied another lift, a long-distance venture he advertised, which would take place two weeks later.

That one didn't go so well.

Despite a good start, on that day the farther the balloon traveled the worse it got. The wind changed direction and became stronger. Nadar lowered *Le Géant* closer to the ground, but the balloon did not slow down. He instructed the passengers to brace for an emergency landing, a maneuver with which even he was unfa-

miliar. The balloon dragged and bounced for nearly a half hour. The terrified passengers grabbed anything they could to hold on. Some even grasped the balloons guide wires like a rope for support, pulling the balloon down even further. Eventually the balloon flew into a thicket of trees, shredded, and slowed in the process. When the gondola finally came to rest, several people had already been thrown off. Everyone had an injury of some kind, including Nadar who fractured both his legs, but surprisingly no one was killed. Nearly eighteen hours after liftoff and four hundred miles from Paris, the balloon was now resting, crumpled and deflated near Nienburg, Germany.

Despite his injuries, Nadar's spirit was still intact. *Four hundred miles!* Now that was something! Even more sensational was a harrowing scrape with an express train. Nadar commissioned an artist to make an illustrated representation of the balloon's close call with the train and placed it in a journal as a companion piece to his book, *Mémoires du Géant*, which featured a thirty-two-page description of the failed journey. It sold well.

After the failed second flight, Nadar took *Le Géant* out for public exhibitions and continued to promote the idea of flight as a means of transportation. No one had to be convinced that balloons, while fast, were likely not the answer, at least not yet. But a winged contraption, perhaps one with a propeller on top, could do the trick. Fundamentally, Nadar's ideas—imagined rather than seen—had some merit. He enlisted some important friends to help. Among them was Victor Hugo who called Nadar a symbol of French patriotism. Thanks to Hugo's endorsement, Nadar became something of a folk hero in his home country. And for those who came to Paris in 1867 to discover the fair's many new innovations, looking up meant seeing Nadar's giant balloon in one grand final flight: "the Vertical Journey," as Hugo put it.

In all, *Le Géant* made three uneventful flights during the fair. The ascents were only for short distances and the balloon flew just fine. Its appearance however was another matter: tattered and worn with strips of sewn-on silk, like bandages covering its "many wounds," as one witness described it. As *Le Géant* passed overhead, observers could hear the steam seeping out, while puffs of

smoke like that from a locomotive came from the patched-up ribs near the top. It was as sad as it was humorous, but on every flight there was Nadar, smiling and sticking his body halfway out one of the gondola's windows, camera in hand ready to capture another shot of the festivities below.

The fair itself was notable for being the most photographed of any world exhibition up to that point. Advances in technology were the main reasons why, but also a sweeping interest in photography was developing, especially in France. Not only could pictures be sold to the public as stereocards, but painters and sculptors were becoming interested buyers as well. They wanted to create in their own styles the images captured on film. Nadar could claim the originality of taking photos from up above, but on the ground a slew of France's finest photography studios took on the task of recording the fair's many exhibits for prosperity.

Among them was Léon & Lévy, a publishing company and editing house that opened in Paris in 1864. The Léon of Léon & Lévy was Moyse Léon, and the Lévy was Georges Lévy, better known as Isaac, Moyse's father-in-law. Together they took many of the pictures preserved from the fair, including those of the statuary that dotted the grounds. They also captured images of other nations' exhibits and people, such as the Tunisian and Mongolian representatives posing in cultural costumes.

Not much else is known about the firm until later in 1895 when Lévy's two sons Abraham and Gaspard took over the business and became Lévy Fils et Cie (Lévy Sons) or LL for short. Perhaps inspired by the interest in the fair, Lévy Fils et Cie found a way to break into the postcard business, at that time popular in France. They produced hundreds of landscape photos from Europe, Asia, Africa, and even America, all under the LL banner. Their foray into postcards also included a number of series, entitled "Oriental Postcards." The title alone does not quite explain what these entailed. True, the cards were oriental in nature, depicting women from mostly Asian countries, even Arabic women from western Asia. But unlike the pictures from the fair of cultured woman in full traditional regalia, these women were shot in a studio and seen mostly topless.

This was not a new concept, especially in Paris, where painters and sculptors had been depicting nudes for years. For the Lévys, though, the realism of the photos was raw and unflinching, and the business of nudes on film soon became a very lucrative trade. Even Félix Nadar dabbled in nude pictures before his aerial adventures began. A series of these sensuous photos show women unclothed and tagged with only their professional names, *Mimi* or *Mariette* (*standing nude*) and the like.

After the fair in 1867, while Nadar's aerial photos gained popularity, *Le Géant* was never seen again. The balloon was dragged from the grounds and tucked away forever. The wicker gondola, one observer stated, was now better suited for "matchwood."

Nadar never achieved the kind of success he aspired to with the balloons, but his portraits of France's finest statesmen, artists, and literary figures are considered signature works. As for aviation in general, Nadar was just one month short of his ninetieth birthday when two American brothers from Dayton, Ohio, Wilber and Orville Wright, brought their flying machine to France in 1908 for an exhibition, showing once and for all that man could achieve sustained flight—something Nadar had envisioned all along.

Nadar died two years later.

For the Lévy Sons, their lasting significance would come unexpectedly in one distinctive photo taken on October 22, 1895, a Tuesday, and a rather uneventful start to another early weekday in France. On that day, a passenger rail express was traveling from the seaside village of Granville to Montparnasse, a quaint neighborhood in the southeast section of Paris. A normal nonstop seven hour and ten minute trip, the train was running late. A young railroad man at the tender age of nineteen, engineer Guillaume Marie Pellerin, tried to make up the time by picking up speed and intending to slow down only as they approached the station. In theory it should have worked. The train was equipped with a Westinghouse air brake that would considerably slow down the train from cruising speed when the locomotive's brakes could not. This time, however, when Pellerin activated the air brake, it failed. He reached for the hand brake, but it was too late. The train barreled into the sta-



“Train Wreck at Montparnasse Station”. Levy & Fils (Sons), photographer, public domain [1895].

tion, through the buffer, across the concourse, and right through the station’s brick wall, sending the locomotive nose-first thirty feet down to Place de Rennes below. The coal car, still attached, was dangling as well, and the first car behind it was barely sticking out of the wall. The rest of the cars were in the station, intact with most remaining on the tracks. No one on the train—not the passengers, not even the poor engineer who jumped and escaped with only minor bruises—was seriously hurt. “More picturesque than fatal” the *Pall Mall Gazette* announced the next day.

But as details came forth, an unsuspecting victim emerged, a woman named Marie-Augustine Aguilard, a newspaper vendor’s wife who just happened to be in front of the station when the train barreled through the wall. Her husband had gone to retrieve the evening papers and left Maria in charge. Although the train’s locomotive missed her on the way down, a masonry brick the size of large box struck her on the head, presumably killing her instantly. Her body was discovered in the debris below.

The locomotive sat in its immobile, downward state for days, so photographers were able to get several shots from various angles. The most famous one is attributed to the studio of Lévy Sons. It is taken from ground level and shows the full locomotive from the left side off the front. Trains wrecked in many different and unusual ways, but this was quite skewed in both its composition and staging.

Indeed, the power of the photograph was just beginning when the Lévy brothers, previously unknown except for collectors of the French landscape and “Oriental Cards,” put their stamp on history. Dramatic images like the Montparnasse train-wreck photo and others like it would soon spur on budding young artists who had now found a new medium ready to explore and exploit.

One of them was a man named Edward Steichen.