

Little Lola Cotton

John Benedict Buescher

In July 1895, the Boys and Girls Aid Society of Los Angeles published a list of ten children recently received into its care. Included were a pair of abandoned siblings: "Carrol Bernel, dark hair and eyes, small for his age, 5 years and 8 months," and "Carmelita Bernel, dark hair and eyes, 3 years and 2 months."¹ Little Carmelita's date and place of birth, according to this notice, was sometime around May 1892, most likely in Southern California.

At the end of March 1897, *The Los Angeles Times* ran an article that reported what had happened to her:

J. L. Cotton, a San Diego barber, and his wife brought a little girl named Carmelela Bernel into Judge Clark's court yesterday and legally adopted her as their daughter, giving her the name of Lola Cotton. The child was about six years old and became very frightened when brought into the Courthouse, bursting into tears when her foster mother left her for a moment. Three years ago the little girl's parents placed her with the Boys and Girls Aid Society in this city. Cotton took her home with him in July, 1896, and has formed such an attachment for her that he wants her as his own daughter.²



Little Lola Cotton

The San Diego barber and his wife were John Leonard Cotton (1849-1923) and Drucilla ("Delia") Lorette (Landon) Cotton (1855-1923). Mr. Cotton had drifted to California from La Porte, Iowa, in the mid 1880s, after his first wife had divorced him. He

¹ "Following is a list of children received ..." *Los Angeles Evening Express*, 19 July 1895.

² "Adopted Carmelela," *Los Angeles Times*, 31 March 1897. Her death notice, however, would later list her birth date as November 15, 1892; place of birth: California.

had married Delia Landon in Los Angeles in 1887. Cotton had been raised by an adoptive family himself, so he and his new wife's willingness to adopt a child likely came easily to them.

Yet Mr. Cotton also appears to have had a plan in mind for little Lola: to exploit her as a clairvoyant prodigy in a second-sight mindreading act. She would perform blindfolded, identifying various objects that audience members would show him. He trained her to read his verbal cues, just as Jean Robert-Houdin had done with his blindfolded son Émile fifty years before, in an act that even then, in 1846, was at least sixty years old.³

A difference, however, was that Mr. Cotton and his daughter Lola would start their public career, not as acknowledged magical mentalists and entertainers, but as true wonder workers. Their audiences would be spiritualists. "Little Lola Cotton" had an advantage over other second-sight performers in the fact that the slightly built little girl seemed naturally incapable of trickery. Audiences would perceive her as a prodigy in the sense of a freak of nature. That would increase their impression that what they were seeing must have been a genuine demonstration of psychic power. She would be presented to the public as the "world's youngest mind reader."⁴

The time was ripe for such an infant prodigy, as evidenced by the national newspaper attention that was given in 1898 to a three and a half-year-old girl, Winifred Cline of Chicago, whose parents reported her as a "baby prophet and seeress." Little Winifred, with a suddenly serious expression, would pause in her play with dolls and picture books and announce the winners of upcoming political elections (she picked McKinley over Bryan) or the whereabouts and doings of people not



³ Historians trace the notice of its public performance back to Jean-Joseph Pinetti in Paris in 1784; Henry Ridgely Evans, *The Old and the New Magic* (Chicago: Open Court, 1909), 35.

⁴ Advocates of Mental Science and New Thought would even use the Cottons as an example of the extraordinary mental development that proper parental training could produce in children; Erastus Whitford Hopkins, *The Science of the New Thought* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1904), 250-251.

present. “Her prophecies,” it was said, “have been confined to the home circle, and it must not be imagined that little Winifred is being exploited as a public character.”⁵

The title of “the youngest mind reader” would become so coveted that others would claim it over the following decades; Baby Cecil, Babe Winifred, Leona Lamar, Baby Yvonne



Little Lola Cotton, 1899

and others all later claimed the title at one time or another.⁶ The title was an assurance to the public that what they were seeing was genuine, and that the performer was an untutored, spontaneous freak of nature. Spiritualists had done this as well with young mediums, minimizing their age and their education, as a supposedly telling piece of evidence that their powers were not the result of trickery.

In April 1897, just a month after the Cottons had formally adopted Lola, “the little wonder” and her father were appearing at the G. A. R. hall in San

Diego assisting Benjamin Morgan Barney (1851-1927) and Mrs. Rozilla Elliott, two of California’s most well-known spiritualist mediums of the time. Ben Barney, often exposed as a fraud, specialized in reading messages in sealed envelopes, and Mrs. Elliott, pastor of a Los Angeles Spiritualist congregation, was a trance medium, giving messages from the spirits. When they appeared with Lola Cotton, they also “psychometrized” ore samples offered to them, to assay their value.⁷

⁵ “A Baby Prophet and Seeress,” *The Philosophical Journal* 34.9 (3 March 1898):129; “Baby Seeress in Chicago,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 January 1898.

⁶ Baby Cecil was the performing name of sideshow and radio mentalist Cecil Marie Nelson (1907-1998), who began performing in 1920; Babe Winifred was fourteen-year-old Winifred Marsh, who did a mentalist turn with magician Ralph Richards’ show for his 1912 season; mentalist Leona Lamar (1883-1941) was billed as the “youngest mind reader,” although she did not start performing as a mentalist until she was thirty-two. “Baby Yvonne” Papkin (1929-1996), the daughter of “Doc” Irving Papkin and his wife Mary Ellen, “Princess Yvonne,” joined their act before she was five. Another competitor for the title was Ita Rinaldo, a fifteen-year-old (in 1910) girl mentalist from California who performed nationwide for about five years. There were other “youngest mind readers,” including a boy or two.

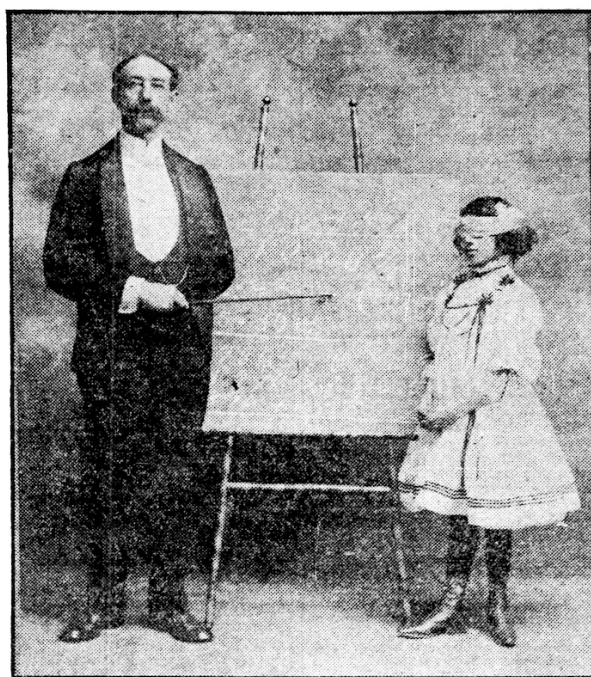
⁷ “Ben Barney Tonight,” *San Diego Union*, 25 April 1897.

The Cottons were on a roll as veritable spirit mediums, even though they performed a second-sight routine. A year after the Cottons brought Lola home with them as their foster child, “Leonard J. Cotton, the California Medium, and Lola Cotton, five-year-old child Medium,” gave “public tests” at the Spiritual Temple in Baltimore.⁸ Mr. Cotton, besides guiding Lola in her blindfolded second sight, was also billed as an “independent slatewriter” who produced messages from spirits written on slate boards that had been blank before being locked together minutes before.

In the fall of 1899, Lola Cotton, “the baby ‘mind reader,’” and her father, amid an intense public interest in the question of whether clairvoyance and telepathy were real, undertook to wow a group of authorities and experts. In the office of the eminent professor of psychology, George Malcolm Stratton of the University of California, she and her father did classic second-sight tricks.⁹ Professor Stratton and other academics and newspaper reporters present watched Lola and her father closely but were unable to discern any system by which John Cotton signaled his daughter. The observers were baffled, but Stratton refused to admit the possibility of genuine thought transference.

In an interview just after the test, Cotton said that he had long been interested in the Occult and was considered an expert, and so, he viewed Lola’s abilities as

dependent on her ability to enter his mind and experience his sense impressions. He also casually asserted that Lola was his own natural child and that she had been born in Allegany County, New York (in fact, his present wife’s birthplace). On another occasion, he



John Leonard Cotton and Lola Cotton, 1903

⁸ “Spiritualism,” *Baltimore Sun*, 21 August 1897.

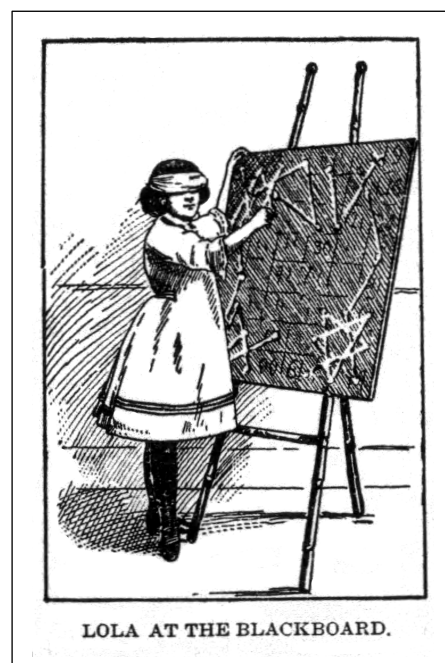
⁹ “Does Lola Cotton Prove Learned Scientists at Fault?” *San Francisco Examiner*, 15 October 1899; “A Marvelous Mind Reader This Child,” *Philadelphia Times*, 26 November 1899, a Sunday feature article that appeared in other papers around the country.

said Lola had been born in Black Hawk County, Iowa (in fact, one of his own earlier places of residence). Presumably, he felt it was important to his “theory” of the sympathetic mental communication between him and Lola that their link was a biological one.

He also claimed that Lola had never been educated, had never even been taught the alphabet, making her feats seem even more miraculous. He would continue to say this over the following few years, although it would surely have raised the issue of whether he was simply exploiting his child by putting her on display, and, at the least, would have dismayed the officials who had approved the child’s adoption on the assumption that she would be educated by her new parents. At least one San Francisco theatrical critic raised similar issues:

The phenomenal Lola Cotton, aetat six, mind reader, is uncanny. I do not like to see a child do this sort of thing. It is too much like poor little [mnemonist] Gertie Cochrane and her brother, the large-headed youngsters who spelled long words, answered questions in geography, figured up mathematical problems and rattled off dates in history. The infant phenomenon does not interest me, and I presume many in the audience felt the same.¹⁰

If Lola’s mind reading was genuine thought transference from her father to her, however (as her father had said), that would not have explained other mental feats that, by this time, had been incorporated into her performances. Lola would stand at a blackboard, blindfolded, and, in the role of what had long been referred to in magic circles as a “lightning calculator,” do complicated arithmetic and algebra problems, including, most famously, directing a



¹⁰ “Dramatic World,” *Town Talk* 8.376 (11 November 1899): 18. Wilma Gertrude (“Gertie”) Cochrane (1887-1946) and her younger brother Thomas Wade Cochrane (1890-1973) plied the vaudeville circuits and dime museums displaying their prodigious memories from about 1894 to 1900; see “Remarkable Memory,” *New York Tribune*, 25 March 1900.

“knight’s tour” of a chess board superimposed on the blackboard, starting from any position given to her by an audience member. It had nothing to do with “mind reading,” but it was drawn from the great bag of mentalism tricks, loosely defined.

The performance itself, therefore, was thoroughly within the genre of magical and mentalist entertainments, but was offered in venues, like rented lecture halls, and among the company of spiritualist mediums, allegedly giving genuine physical manifestations of supposed spirit power, mostly to believers. On May 6, 1900, for example, the “Crindle-Cotton Company” of mediums gave an “open séance on a fully lighted stage” (ticket prices 15 to 50 cents) at the city auditorium in Spokane, Washington. The hall manager provided “a committee of prominent people of the city to sit on the stage and oversee the manifestations.”¹¹ The “mediums” onstage were four: John and Lola Cotton, and Henry Crindle and his common-law wife, Ethel Hodge. Crindle was the son and main assistant of the notorious, often-exposed spirit medium, Elsie Crindle-Reynolds, who specialized in materializing gauzy forms from cabinets in the dark. Hodge also had spent several years doing the same at spiritualist camps in Ohio and California.

Was what they were doing a religious invocation, a scientific experiment into powers beyond the ken of science, or merely a clever fraud? Or was it just an undefined “entertainment”? It seems impossible to disentangle exactly what their audiences thought. The context was ambiguous, although leaning heavily toward spiritualistic “séance” and spirit “mediumship,” but the audience was deliberately left free to treat it however it wished. There was no sense, financially speaking, in limiting the reasons why people might want to pay to see it. As for the performers, they did not have to make it very clear what they were offering, and, consequently, they proceeded to “saw wood and say nothing,” as the old adage went.

Nevertheless, “the world’s youngest mind reader” had to be presented with some edge onto which an audience might cling, and John Cotton and his wonderful daughter, while keeping the act as it was, began to downplay the spiritualist interpretation and emphasized Lola as a unique prodigy, a manifestation of a parapsychological reality, a sport

¹¹ “Séance at the Auditorium,” *Spokesman Review*, 5 May 1900; ad for The Auditorium, *Spokane Chronicle*, 5 May 1900.

of nature. The result was that the Cottons began appearing as features in dime museums and in the midway portions of expositions.¹²

Even as early as the summer of 1899, for example, the Cottons' act had a place in the midway of the Greater American Exposition in Omaha, and John Cotton made the acquaintance there of Carl Louis Perin, a Hungarian con artist, originally named Karl Pscherhofer. He had immigrated to the U. S. in 1888 and had conducted a series of real estate and stock scams around the country until he was sent to Auburn State Prison for five years beginning in 1891. There he studied palmistry and emerged from his incarceration with a new name and a lucrative specialty in reading the palms of the rich and famous, and conducting a mail-order palm reading service. He and his wife also conducted contests, sponsored by various newspapers, in which mothers sent in palm prints of their babies, which would be awarded prizes if they were judged to have exemplary indications of a successful future. At the Omaha Exposition, Perin built and conducted a Temple of Palmistry, a mishmash of strange architecture and furnishings, which contained a salon where he, as President of the Greater American Occult Society (of which he may have been the only member), read palms. After the Cottons became acquainted with Perin in Omaha, they toured together briefly through the upper Midwest attached to a carnival troupe.¹³



In the early fall of 1901, Lola appeared as a feature in the Gypsy Camp section of the phantasmagorical wonders at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo.¹⁴ With the

¹² In July 1899, they were booked into the Clark Street Museum in Chicago; in September 1901, into the 9th Street Arch Dime Museum in Philadelphia.

¹³ "Lecture on Palmistry, *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 24 August 1899; "A Phenomenal Child," *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 26 August 1899. Perin eventually broke into vaudeville, starting in November 1903 at Keith's in Boston. In his act, he roamed the theater aisles reading people's palms, then mounted the stage and had people in the balcony raise their hands to a spotlight illuminating them, and he read their palms from the stage using a telescope, telling their futures and doing a few mentalist tricks, such as reading the serial numbers of audience members' paper currency.

¹⁴ Richard H. Barry, *Snap Shots on the Midway of the Pan-Am Expo* (Buffalo: R. A. Reid, 1901), 133. Lola went missing for a few days during the Expo; see "Little Lola, Mind Reader, Is Missing," *Buffalo Courier*, 3 August 1901.

temporary move East, she and her father also secured their first contract with a big circuit,



LOLA COTTON
THE CHILD MIND READER AND MATHEMATICIAN
--GYPSY CAMP

appearing at Keith's in Boston in October 1901, where she performed as a psychological phenomenon, an enigma.¹⁵ A reporter for the *Boston Post*, after meeting Lola and her father asked his readers rhetorically how she could do what she did:

What is the key to the secret locked in her childish breast, if indeed the secret be hidden there at all, as a matter of actual knowledge? Cross-questioning has thus far utterly failed to draw forth any confidence from this small sphinx which throws the least ray of light upon the subject. Does Lola know more than she will tell? Or, knowing nothing about it, does the secret lie in the unconscious subservience of her brain to another's controlling influence?¹⁶

Their ads, proclaiming the phenomenon of thought transmission, now distanced Lola from spirit mediumship:

As [telepathy] is being divorced from superstition and claims of supernatural media, more and more people are taking up consideration of it, and a demonstration draws enlightened people where a few years ago the majority of the educated classed all such things as fakes.¹⁷

The contract with Keith's was Lola Cotton's entrée into nationwide renown. "The world's youngest mind reader" would spend the next several years in a whirlwind of theater engagements on the Keith, Orpheum, Pantages, and Poli circuits. Lola seems to have been very good at her performances, but second-sight performers in vaudeville were not

¹⁵ Ad for Keith's theater, *Boston Post*, 20 October 1901.

¹⁶ "Boston's 9-Year-Old Phenomenon," *Boston Post*, 10 November 1901.

¹⁷ "An Exhibition of Psychic Phenomena at Park Theater," *Alameda Daily Argus*, 12 August 1905.

uncommon. What made the Cottons' act stand out was not the performance itself, but the fact that the telepath was a young girl. That made it a curiosity. The Cottons eventually



"The World's Youngest Mind Reader"

tried incorporating other elements of the standard mentalist repertoire. She was briefly billed as a hypnotist, for example. And when she was thirteen, she did a smartly executed blindfold drive, at the reins of a pair of horses, driving a carriage (with her father standing up behind her) through the streets of Atlanta. She uncovered the hiding place of a congratulatory envelope deposited there by an investigating committee (which she read blindfolded before unsealing it).¹⁸

Lola, however, like any other girl, advanced in age. That presented a problem for the act; it diminished its novelty.

By age sixteen, Lola had crossed the bridge of puberty and had become an attractive young woman. How could the Cottons re-invigorate their act with some novel element that would again raise it above other mind reading acts?

The answer was to replace the appeal to her extreme youth with an appeal to her exotic origin. Until then, Lola had been billed as simply the extraordinary, natural child of John and Drucilla Cotton. Now that was adjusted, although the act itself remained essentially the same. In the new version of the act, Lola was presented as "Lolo," a mysterious child, an Oglala "Sioux Seeress," born on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, the granddaughter of Rain-in-the-Face, who fought under Sitting Bull at the Little Big Horn. When her

What's in Your Pocket?

LOLO

KNOWS

LOLO
Indian Mind Reader

and
Big Bill of Keith Vaudeville
Including
SATSUDA JAPS

at the

Opheum

ALL THIS WEEK

600 Seats For a Dime Every After-
noon.
Evening 15c to 50c—None Higher

Lolo, the Sioux Seeress, 1910

¹⁸ "Girl Telepathist to Drive Blindfold to Hidden Object, *Atlanta Georgian and News*, 15 October 1907; "Drives Blindfold Through Streets for Test of Skill," *Atlanta Georgian and News*, 16 October 1907.

Indian parents died and left her an orphan, the government's Indian agent for the reservation, "Major" John L. Cotton, took an interest in the waif and noticed, under his care, that he was able to communicate his thoughts to her.¹⁹ "When Lolo reached the age of 10 years," her publicity said, "she was committed into the care of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart Convent, San Diego, Cal., and there made her home during the ensuing five years."²⁰

I have yet to find a newspaper article about "Lolo" in which the writer recognizes or



Lolo, the Mystic Indian Girl At Poli's Next Week.

reveals that she was the same person as the decidedly non-Indian mentalist girl Lola who had been before the public nationwide for the previous fourteen years. Nevertheless, some question about "Lolo's" bona fides probably arose, for her publicized relationship to Mr. Cotton, which at first sounded like she had just been grabbed by the Indian agent, eventually shifted slightly. In May 1911, the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* described "Lolo" as "a Sioux Indian girl only 16 years old [she was actually just turning 19], loaned by the United States government to J. L. Cotton for exhibition purposes through this country and Canada."²¹ And, perhaps to suggest why she

¹⁹ "Major" Cotton's real military service consisted of service in the 31st and the 47th Iowa Infantry as a private during the Civil War. His divorced wife in Iowa "inherited" his Civil War disability pension when he abandoned her, fled to California, and remarried. She then claimed a pension as his "widow."

²⁰ "Indian Girl with Mystic Power the Descendant of a Mighty War Chieftain," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 8 October 1911.

²¹ "Amusements," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, 4 May 1911.

would have shunned actual contact with Native Americans or why no Sioux knew of her, in February 1914, the *Des Moines News* reported that she “hates [the] sight of her own people.” She was still declared to be sixteen (by then she was about to turn 21). But, it was said, when just an orphaned toddler on the Pine Ridge Reservation, in the care of her Indian agent guardian Cotton, “she could tell by his expression whether he saw an Indian in the distance or whether his mind was bent on Indian affairs. Then the little one would hide after the warning against her bugaboo she read in her parent’s mind. The strange talent of the wee Indian maid was fostered.”²²

“Lolo” now ascended the stage dressed in full Indian garb, in buckskin and beads, with her long black hair in two side braids, and a single feather sticking up from behind a



headband. “Redfacing” was the Cottons’ solution to adding the element of novelty back into the act, now that Lola/Lolo was an attractive young woman and could no longer bear the title of “the youngest” of anything. Their new personas were born in 1909 and would serve the Cottons for almost a decade. To make the act congeal around the Native American theme, they added a sharpshooting segment, in which Lolo would snuff out the flame of a candle that her father held, and otherwise give evidence of her prowess with tricks common to Wild West shows.²³ But despite all the external trappings, the act was essentially the same it had always been—a two-

²² “Indian Chief’s Child Hates Sight of Her Own People,” *Des Moines News*, 9 February 1913. At the end of the article, however, the reader learns that “Lolo declares that, way down deep in her heart, she loves Indians as they are her own flesh and blood. She cannot explain the peculiar feeling that comes over her at sight of a member of her own race.”

²³ “Lolo” was performing in vaudeville during the years when another young woman, Loretta Navarre, not herself a Native American, first adopted a Native American persona and name—“Wahletka”—and a fake backstory about her Cherokee roots and became a top-ranked stage and radio mentalist. “Lolo’s” biographical flourish about having been raised for a while by nuns tracks closely with “Wahletka’s” imaginary biography.

person second-sight act, with a blindfolded Carmelita-Lola-Lolo identifying objects that her father could see.²⁴

What changed around this core was the fluid context in which it had been performed, including the types of venues in which they appeared, the explicit and implicit explanations to audiences that formed the public's notion of what they were seeing and what it signified, and the public's tastes and interests (following, for example, a shift in public interest from spiritualism to psychology and parapsychology; and from an unapologetic curiosity with displayed freaks to a romanticized vision of the "vanishing noble Red man").

"Lolo" the Sioux seeress camped out on the vaudeville circuits for about five years, but by 1914, when she was twenty-one, her father had turned sixty-five and the bookings slowed down as a result. That year Lola married a burly ex-policeman, who, just days after the wedding, revealed his violent side. She fled and would not be wooed back. A divorce was granted a month later.

A year afterwards, she married again, this time to a man who seems to have been an acquaintance of (and therefore vetted by) her adoptive mother's kin back in New York State, whom Lola and her parents had often visited. That marriage, to Earl Frank Brown (1884-1968), performed in California, was a happy one, and the couple settled in San Diego, which had been the Cottons' home ever since they adopted her. After the marriage, Lola (as "Lolo") only occasionally went out with her father to perform, and almost always as part of a charity benefit. The last ad found for a performance of "Lolo" was in 1918. Each of her parents died in San Diego in 1923. Housewife Lola C. Brown, with her husband Earl, raised a son, Frank Leonard Brown (1918-1996), in Lemon Grove in San Diego County, where she became an active member of the Rebekahs, and where she died in July 1975.

²⁴ One review of her performance as "Lolo" from 1913 mentions that she also "tells secrets that have been locked in their owners' breasts," so she may have included observations about the character or futures of audience members by this time; "The Week's Drama—Orpheum," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 February 1913.