

“Hypnotizing Toulouse-Lautrec”

Paris, 1888

After supper, our group gravitated toward the sitting room, a more intimate setting, while Theo and Vincent Van Gogh tidied up to give Madame Joseph less work in the morning. We three women were escorted to the several armchairs while the others gallantly sat on the floor. Toulouse-Lautrec hobbled with the aid of his canes to a chair. After insisting on a side table and a full glass of cognac, Lautrec brought up the topic of hypnosis. He and the other artists present knew that I had worked for Charcot at the Salpêtrière asylum.

Lautrec, his typical tone, mockery, pressed for more information. “Reliable sources say Julie Forette’s mastery of the technique surpasses even the hypnotist supreme, Jean-Martin Charcot.”

“Dr. Charcot and I take a different approach.”

“Really? Well, I have a sparkling idea, hypnotize me. Show us your power over the mind.”

I declined, but he persisted, “Hypnotize me, please, Mademoiselle Forette, please. Sweep out those spiders lurking in the corners of my mind.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Ah, see how she demurs! But in the interest of truth and psychological science, you must show all of our guests *le petite monstre* that I might be in trance!”

Sabrine made a misguided attempt to come to my aid. “My sister and I are but ordinary women, born and bred in Marseilles, with no formal education—save for our brief inculcation by the Sisters of the Sacred Heart.”

The remark put a lull in the conversation, but stirred Gauguin: “Mademoiselle Sabine, you and your sister are anything but ordinary; I, for one, know how well-versed Mademoiselle Forette is in the new field of psychology.”

He remained my nemesis. Our break-up still a painful knot. “I’m sure Monsieur Gauguin and others here have equal or more knowledge about psychology.”

“Poo-foo! Foo-poo! False modesty,” charged Lautrec. “We the artists of the Petite Boulevards anoint you our psychologist and so demand a hypno-performance!”

I looked around, Emile Bernard and Paul Signac nodding yes, Felix Fénéon merely focused on putting another cigarette into his amber holder. I saw Vincent, guest of honor, at the doorway. He had been the first artist I hypnotized. Silently, he left.

“Is it not true,” Lautrec went on, “that you can you put a fellow in a dream carriage and journey him back to childhood?”

"I have seen it done at the Hypnosis Clinic in Nancy.”

“Bravo! Then hypnotize away! But be forewarned, the superior intellect of Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec Montfa,” he tapped a finger to the side of his head, “will make it *impossible* for any hypnotist to dominate an indefatigable will.”

I could not help but smile at his ignorance. A superior intelligence usually made hypnotic suggestion that much easier. “Perhaps we could experiment at another time, in a more private setting,” I said.

Lautrec was not to be refused; he produced a folded note. “If I may read: ‘The special gift I can offer Toulouse-Lautrec is my ability to...’ he paused with a sly smile, “hypnotize him.”

He fluttered the note at me, the game question I had completed long ago at his Wednesday matinee, my lapse of judgment coming back to mock.

“I believe this can be considered,” he play-acted the lawyer, “a promissory note.”

“Or the very least,” Gauguin added, “a rain-check ticket from a cancelled theatre performance.”

For another opinion, I looked to critic Felix Fénéon who nonchalantly blew up a circle of smoke. Vincent reappeared in the doorway— “Mademoiselle Julie, with a pass of her hand or a dangling amulet, can open the coffin of memories.” His hypno-dream of twin graves came to mind.

Suzanne Valadon smiling came forward. “Settled!” She removed Lautrec's stove chimney top hat. “So to be serious, you won't need this outrageous chapeau.”

“Egad!” he exclaimed. “Am I being prepared for brain surgery?”

I had him sit in a chair facing me. Everyone knew to be silent. Which method would work best with Lautrec, what would keep him focused? From the side table, I picked up his half-consumed cognac.

“Be careful,” he joked, “that's all I have left.”

“Don't talk, not another word.”

He went quiet. Lautrec really wanted to be hypnotized. But it would not be with mirrors, candles or the Egyptian amulet still hidden beneath my bodice. I tipped the glass slightly, dipped a thumb into the cognac then ran the wet thumb slowly across my bottom lip, back and forth, slowly. Assured of his rapt attention, I again dipped the thumb deep into the cognac.

“Refraction,” I softly remarked.

He focused, as expected, on the surface line of the liquid, searching for the juncture where thumb made its illusionary shift. I then placed my thumb upon the glass rim, round and round the circumference, faster, until the glass produced a bright ring, Lautrec completely caught

up in the visual and aural phenomenon until, giving no warning, I pressed the thumb hard into the center of his forehead. “Sleep!”

His eyes shut. But I wasn’t certain if my command had taken effect. Suzanne Valadon, his lover, looked especially skeptical. She knew his mischievous behavior. Finding her hat, she removed a pin, took his hand and pricked the little finger, producing a tiny dot of blood. He did not flinch, did not move.

I instructed him that he would hear my voice alone; I told him that I was the driver of his dream carriage. “Step inside, Toulouse, take a seat, and through the carriage window watch the years roll back.”

Slowly I recited the years, 1888, 1887... back we traveled.

In a somnambulant state, he surrendered completely to suggestion. 1873... 1872...
“Toulouse, the carriage is slowing down, slowing down. Look out the window.”

“Goodness gracious!” He was happily amazed. “Lolo! In her golden cage! Oh, sing for me, Lolo! Sing a song of six- pence, a pocketful of rye.”

“Toulouse, who is Lolo? How old are you? Where are you?”

“Why, she is my very own canary—tweet for me, Lolo, four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie. I am eight. But why am I not eight in this carriage? Nice carriage at that, seats of fine Spanish leather.”

Lautrec’s trance had become peculiarly distinctive. Unlike any other hypnoid subject, he appeared to be aware of two discrete selves. “Put your head farther out of the carriage window, Toulouse, and tell me what you can see.”

“For certain, I’m smack in the universe of time, and stars abound, like luminous discs. But no! How clever the designer! They are gas-lit stages! And numbered! I see number 9.”

“Go there.”

“I’m at Stage #9, nine-years-old, and I have the new pencils Mama has given me and I shall draw my very own heraldic device.”

“What will it be?”

“A spider.”

Suzanne looked pained, watching him transformed into a nine-year-old, hunched, intently drawing his multi-leg spider. Better, I thought, to travel to another time. “Another stage awaits you, Toulouse.”

“Number 11! I’m writing a letter to Mama. Dear Mama, don’t fret for your eleven-year-old mushroom; Dr. Vernier does all he can to properly treat my legs. Time will tell. Ha! Your mushroom does keep much-much company with his bed, but as you see, letter writing is by far his favorite pastime. Oh Mama, I have the silliest notion, I leave my legs here and go off in an envelope, just to kiss you and Papa. If I could, I would do it! Yes!”

“Move to another stage, Toulouse.”

“I’m twelve. Dr. Vernier seems satisfied with the progress of my legs, what with the electric brush treatments, although I’m awfully tired of limping with my left now that the right one is cured. Mama orders a short crutch especially for me; now I can better maneuver the slippery streets of Paris and bravely enter the Church of St. Louis d’Antin, hop-hopping to the altar to receive Communion. Yikes! I have swallowed God whole.”

“Is there a star 13?”

“Why, yes! There’s my beloved puppet theatre which I have started with my pal Henri. I’m very, very busy! What with sixty actors who work exclusively for me. How easy to boss them around since they are just ten centimeters tall. And quite willing to jump when I pull the

right strings. I pull on Tu Tu's strings then on Melo's strings and they dance a pas de deux—but, oh no! I have fallen off the chair! Dear me! Here I've gone and fractured my left thigh bone. Mama is beside herself with sad disbelief, 'Oh, my little mushroom, how can this be? The chair is so-o low!' Be that as it may, in time the bone knits together again—thank God! I now walk with my brand new Majorcan crutch.” Lautrec suddenly opened his eyes, but saw no one in the room; he remained his thirteen- year-old self, telling us he waited anxiously.

“For whom, Toulouse? “

“My beautiful cousin, Jeanne d ‘Armagnac, who I hope will come to my bedside. She sometimes comes in the evening. She is so tall and beautiful, and when she enters my bedroom, I listen to her soothing voice, not daring to even peek at her, as I am neither tall nor beautiful—just Mr. One-Foot.”

Around the room I saw everyone growing dispirited. I should have hypnotized Lautrec alone. “Go to Star 14.”

He frowned. “There I am, at Papa's health spa, for which he pays handsomely, and what do I do? Fall in a ditch and fracture my right leg. Honestly, I can state these accidents are committed without any ulterior motive.”

“Star 15, Toulouse.”

“My legs have ceased to grow. Dr. Vernier says so to Papa. Mama cries an awful lot these days for her poor little mushroom.”

“16, Toulouse, 16.”

“I say to Mama, ‘Let my legs burn in hell as long as I can keep my new desire’.”

“What is your new desire, Toulouse?”

“Painting. I thank Mama and Papa so much for the paints and fine Ingres paper.”

I paused and observed my subdued and solemn audience. Sifting through the painful memories of another human being was no parlor game after all. I read the faces of those who neither wanted nor needed another event from their friend's heartbreaking past.

I wanted to probe and delve deeper, tempted to let the dream carriage take him farther into the past. What other moments in time had made their indelible impression? When the first drop of alcohol to touch the tongue, appease pain and make Toulouse-Lautrec an alcoholic? What of the first kiss? Whom? In a brothel? When the first tear? The kind of hypnosis I offered could very well reach the origins that impelled us to behave as we do.

I knew that there was one other person in the room who would dare me to go forward with the hypno-dream. Gauguin's eyes burning on me, I waited for his encouragement, or anyone who sensed the profundity of the experiment, to reach further into Lautrec's subconscious, a storehouse of significant memories which directed our lives.

But no one spoke until Theo van Gogh came forward, anxious. He looked at Lautrec who still seemed to be peering into a faraway past. "What happens if you awaken him now?"

"The dream travel will be a blank to him."

"Then wake him, bring him out of the trance. Give him the freedom to bury his wretched memories."

My sister went to Lautrec and pressed her lips lightly onto his forehead. At first I was startled then grew certain that she remembered Dr. Charcot's pressure points, the zones that returned hysterics to consciousness.

Blinking, Toulouse-Lautrec smiled at Sabine. I took her arm, gently guiding her away. She gazed at each one in the room. "To be here tonight, amidst your multi-coloured auras, is paradise to me."

Lautrec took quick note of an awkward situation, everyone aware of Sabine's recent release from Charcot's asylum. "Droll thing, life," he quipped. "A shame I could not be hypnotized."