

THE SWAMI AND THE SAVANT

by A.W. Hill

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The factual basis of the following fantasy was first related to me by John Dobson, founder of the Sidewalk Astronomers, former Vedantist monk, and the roving Jack Kerouac of physicists. Dobson, who turns 89 this year, is a largely undiscovered treasure, whose efforts to unify Asian wisdom and Theoretical Physics echo those of Aldous Huxley, Fritjof Capra, and the subject of this short story, Nikola Tesla, for whose memory Mr. Dobson has a special fondness. Dobson's little book, Advaita Vedanta and Modern Science, provides what may be the clearest elucidation for the layperson of Einstein's theories I have yet seen in print. - Author

FOR SOME, SATORI COMES as it did to Saint Paul: in a spiritual white-out which renders all that came before as blindness. Others may find it in the well of despair, or in a survey of life's wasted opportunities. From time to time, however, it flashes from what initially seems happenstance: a commingling of disparate lights that only time and distance reveal as a new constellation. My great-grandfather was witness to such a celestial event, and the stars were as bright as they came in those days.

The headline in the *New York Herald's* society column of Sunday, February 9, 1896, read as follows:

A Wonderful Curio Supper Proves the
Most Novel Entertainment of
the Winter Season.

I can attest, albeit from four generations remove, that the affair was as reported, because my great-grandfather, Claydon Webb, was among those few fortunates to have received an invitation to the *soiree* from its hostesses, Mrs. Austin Corbett and her sister, Miss Annie Corbett, of 425 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. If the *Herald* had aptly characterized the evening as "entertainment", then it was of a rarefied sort, for the guest list featured the great French actress known as *The Divine* Sarah Bernhardt -- or simply, "the Bernhardt" -- the eminent psychologist William James, and two gentlemen whose minds were arguably a century ahead of their time: the visionary electrician/inventor, Nikola Tesla, and from Calcutta, the Vedantin swami known as Vivekananda, whose advocacy of Universal Religion had become a *cause celebre* among spiritual progressives following his first American appearance at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions. Indeed, my granddad's creed was never quite the same after the encounter.

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In the late winter of 1896, New York City was still waltzing through what Mark Twain had dubbed “The Gilded Age”, though only a small number of its citizens knew such gilt. It was the time of the Robber Baron, and no previous slice of American history had seen such disparity between rich and poor. Hard snow, blackened by coal soot, lay banked against the brownstones of upper Fifth Avenue; immigrant workers, willing to work tirelessly for a day’s bread, crossed paths with sleek black hansoms in J.P. Morgan’s Gramercy Park. The milieu would not have been unfamiliar to Dickens.

And yet, there was great intellectual and spiritual ferment in the land, a sense that with the turn-of-the-century, a finer sort of gold might bring luster to uptown and downtown alike. There was, literally and figuratively, electricity in the air, and its conductors were not only the newly strung high-tension wires but the newly educated women of the era, who found themselves with that most subversive of luxuries: time to think. Mrs. Corbett and twin sister, Annie, were such women, and their fascination with all things spiritualistic had now led them to investigate the mysteries of the East.

The party had come to supper following a performance of Mme. Bernhardt’s latest play, a costly French production entitled *Iziel* which dramatized the attempted seduction of the Buddha by the Indian courtesan, Ambapali. The latter, of course, was played by Bernhardt, then a youthful fifty-one, who spent most of the four acts in the Buddha’s lap. Great effort had been put into the sets, particularly those designed to evoke the Indian street, and the word about town was that *The Bernhardt* had requested an audience with Swami Vivekananda in order to query him on “spiritual questions” raised by the play. In those days, *no one* refused a summons from the regal Sarah. *Swamiji* -- as Vivekananda was known -- was *un personnage* in his own right, and but for his almost childlike curiosity, might not have felt so obliged. Once committed, however, he’d enlisted the Corbetts to arrange this meeting of Eastern and Western luminaries.

At 52, William James, brother of novelist Henry, hadn’t yet published his seminal text, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, but he’d been teaching at Harvard since 1872, his *Principles of Psychology* was considered a foundational work of the new science, and he’d coined the phrase *stream of consciousness*. At the time of receiving his invitation to the Corbett’s supper, he was immersed in a new book, and would have declined had he not glanced at the guest list and seen that the occasion offered an opportunity to observe the elements of his abiding fascination: faith, will, and spiritual truth as something authenticated by its *effect* on believers. Beside that, he was a fan of The Bernhardt.

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All four of the principals in that Friday evening's discussion were at the zenith of cultural deification, but though the group included a "divine" actress and a genuine holy man, Nikola Tesla, at 40, had achieved the closest thing to apotheosis. Three years earlier, at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, he'd spectacularly bested his arch-rival, Thomas Edison, in the bitterly fought "Battle Of The Currents," a contest between Edison's *Direct Current* and Tesla's *Alternating Current*. Edison had J.P. Morgan's financial empire in his corner, and Tesla had found a passionate sponsor in George Westinghouse. As if Tesla's victory weren't enough to insure immortality, he'd also pioneered radio, x-ray photography, and robotics, and in remaining prodigiously inventive, steadfastly celibate (though rumors of homosexuality dogged him to his grave), and willful to a fault, had ascended the pillar reserved for Nietzsche's *Superman*. He was six-feet-two and strikingly handsome, resplendent that evening, as on most, in white tie and tails. Women grew dizzy in his presence, and that was when they weren't gossiping that he'd come from Venus. As a final flourish on his *resume* (and one of great interest to the Corbett sisters), he was said to possess remarkable psychic gifts.

As of late, however, the ground had begun to quake beneath Tesla's feet, as it does eventually for all men hailed in their time as prophets. The triumph of AC power had not come without cost, and in certain quarters, adulation had turned to scorn. Some in the press derided him as a showman, a charlatan, or worse. At the very moment when he was near breakthrough in development of a system for worldwide wireless communication, his salvific crusade for "free energy" had made the investor class wary. All New York was aware that in the Spring of 1895, his Fifth Avenue laboratory had burned to the ground, vaporizing radio components and other marvelous inventions (for which Tesla kept designs only in his head), but few knew how precarious his financial situation was or what dark forces were arrayed against him. He'd sold his alternating current patents to Westinghouse outright, and at the time of the Corbett's supper, was agonizing over whether or not to mortgage his enterprise to the man who'd done his best to crush him: J.P. Morgan. Tesla had a bad head for business and a heart full of misplaced trust, and on that cold February night, his soul and sense of mission were on ice. He could accept Morgan's offer and trade his independence for a seat on the board, or continue his wireless energy research and gamble on the blessings of history or the curse of ignominy. Tesla had heard Vivekenanda speak and been much impressed. Perhaps, he'd thought, the eastern star will offer some illumination.

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Swami Vivekananda was a man of great erudition whose plump cheeks and ebullient manner disguised his thirty-three years and poor health, and made him seem less imposing than he was, even in ochre robes and full turban. Sarah Bernhardt was a tiny, red-headed woman of modest looks whose vaulting talent and stellar reputation made her seem a great beauty. Possessed of equal charisma, they were well-matched in their velvet-cushioned chairs, placed opposite one another in the Corbett's *salon*. At right angles on either side sat William James and Nikola Tesla, James warming a glass of sherry in his palms and Tesla nursing a whiskey. Professor James wore a full beard and spoke in a scholarly baritone; Tesla, far more the dandy, sported a neatly trimmed moustache and, when excited, had an almost preternaturally high voice, as if his body itself were a live wire. The rest of the guests hovered as close to the fire of genius as they dared, sipping mulled wine or schnapps. My great-grandfather was among them, and as the summit began, pardoned his way to the edge of the circle. After a somewhat portentous introduction by Mrs. Corbett, Bernhardt posed the first query to *Swamiji*.

"Je desire comprendre..."

"I wish to understand," repeated the interpreter, "what is meant by the Hindoo concept of *maya*. I am told that all we see, touch, and hold dear is illusion, and though I can appreciate such *legerdemain* as an actress, I cannot fathom it as a sensible woman."

The Swami smiled and offered a little bow. "Perhaps it is not as a sensible woman that you should attempt to 'fathom' it, dear lady. You have played many roles, all splendidly. I will direct my answer to you in the role of *Sakti*, well of divine energy."

It was Bernhardt's turn to smile, as she evidently liked the comparison. Tesla leaned forward, resting the whiskey on his knee, and James avidly studied the great actress's practiced body language, from which the power of *eros* was never absent.

"Maya ..." Vivekananda cleared his throat. "It is a good place to "dive in", though perhaps also the deepest. To say that something is illusory does not mean it is *without value*. Quite the contrary. It *has* value precisely because its true nature is transcendent." He swept his hand across the space between them, letting the drape of his robe fall from his arm. "I wear a garment which hides my nakedness, and beneath that I wear a garment of flesh which hides my bones. But even my bones, which appear far more solid than either garment, are composed of millions upon millions of tiny atoms, dancing on the divine breath which we call *Prana* and you call energy." He turned to Tesla and cocked an eyebrow. "Is it not accurate, Mr. Tesla, to say that this energy man-

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ifests in Nature as electromagnetism?"

"It is certain that one form of it does, *Swamiji*," said Tesla. "This is precisely what Maxwell found."

"Yes, yes," agreed the Swami. "He found a *field*. And *Brahman*, the ultimate reality, is like the *field of fields!*" He rubbed his chin, then returned to Mme. Bernhardt, whose dark eyes were fixed on Tesla. The holy man cleared his throat softly. "So, as I was saying, dear lady, all things are *formed* of atoms, which themselves arise from a deeper reality. We become attached to our loved ones, our fine silks, our pets ... even killing to defend them! Yet no one would think of becoming attached to an atom!" Vivekananda giggled and mimed the act of holding an invisible dog on a leash. "Come along, my little atom! Come, precious Fifi!"

Bernhardt put her tiny hand to her mouth in delight, and the gracefully aging skin around her eyes crinkled. The salon rippled with laughter.

"How much less," the Swami added, "should we think to *possess* the infinite sea from which these forms arise like waves. Can we take as separate what is merely a form of the sea? The wave is *maya*. Only the sea is real."

Vivekananda took a sip of water, licked his lips, and turned to William James. "Does this not correspond, Professor James, to your thesis that all things are formed of the stuff of consciousness?"

"It may be," James replied, "the only way to explain mystical experience. But -"

Bernhardt gave a little cough, and the three men swiveled toward her as one. "You are saying, then ... that the true nature of all things is *divine*?"

"I am," the Swami affirmed. "So you see, Madame, your sobriquet is quite in order!" Bernhardt laughed gaily, and then Vivekananda added, "Further, I am certain that, one day, men such as Mr. Tesla and Mr. James will find proof of this in science."

"I'm afraid I can't yet share your certainty," James said. "I have occasion to see much in nature, present company excepted, that is far from divinity."

"Ah, yes," replied Vivekananda. "All form is transitory, and *maya* can twist a swan's neck into a serpent. The serpent's true nature, however, remains unblemished."

"Then I take it," James said, "that you do not give much credence to the Biblical idea of mankind's fall from God ..."

"We cannot 'fall', but we *can* err," answered the Swami. "I return to the fact that we are made of atoms, and ask you: can an atom be evil? Did not Jesus say that the good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit?" He leaned toward James with a twinkle in his

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eye and placed a finger against his temple. "I submit that the depravity you see arises from a reality constructed ... in *here*. The mind is a great maker of demons."

Tesla smiled. "You might have found agreement with Bishop Berkeley on that, *Swamiji*. He contended that material objects had no existence outside the mind --"

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed Bernhardt. "*Quelle idee!*"

"I do not say that objects do not exist." Vivekananda rapped the arm of his chair for emphasis. "Only that we fail to see them rightly. This is the effect of the *gunas* --"

"The veiling power of *Tamas*," said Tesla, his eyes reflecting the fiery hue of the Swami's robe. "The projecting power of *Rajas*. The revealing power of *Sattva*."

Vivekananda raised his dimpled chin and smiled, offering the inventor a bow. "You have read Shankara, Mr. Tesla?"

"No less avidly than I read the work of Mr. James," replied Tesla, with a gracious nod to the psychologist. "Although I am an authority on neither. But it seems to me that your *Vedanta* is the philosophical system most consistent with modern science."

"Then surely, Mr. Tesla," said the Swami, "you must have considered the possibility that all material phenomena are but aggregations of energy ..."

"Well, I --" Tesla began.

"But cannot we ..." Bernhardt began in English, then turned to her translator. "Can we not," he continued, "love the forms of God as we love God himself? Can we not find all the more delight in a rose if we know its true name? "

"Madame Bernhardt," said the Swami, his eyes glistening. "You have, as they say in America, hit the nail on the head!" He raised an imaginary hammer and gave it a firm whack, and Bernhardt's face lit up. "You see," he continued, "if we saw things rightly, even the common earthworm would be worthy of reverence ... and if --"

"If physics were to be reconciled with mysticism," William James offered, "we might have a genuine science of mind ..."

"... and an end to the Cartesian divide," said Tesla. "Mind and matter would be seen as complementary ... interpenetrating."

Sarah Bernhardt cupped a trembling hand to her interpreter's ear, and he added: "As would God and Man. Our fall would then be broken ..."

"Careful, *Madame*," said William James. "Such sentiments would once have consigned you to the stake!"

"Hooaa!" said *la Bernhardt* with a roll of her eyes, then in French, "I have been

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there many times ... the flames are not so hot as they say!"

On the heels of the translation, there was gay laughter, and my grandfather raised his glass and led the Corbetts and their guests in a toast to *The Bernhardt*.

When the laughter had subsided, Tesla addressed the circle. "But I wonder ... if mankind is ready for such a unification. If duality, and indeed, *conflict* are not somehow 'designed' into our function ..." He knitted his brow. "If we must *err* in order to *exist*."

"Is mankind ready," the Swami teased, "for what you've proposed in *Century Magazine* ... a system for the worldwide wireless distribution of information and electrical power, so that even the poor of Calcutta shall read Proust by electric lights?"

"This," Tesla replied, "I cannot say. It may be *me* who goes to the stake."

There was again laughter, but muted, as if all present shared a grave presentiment. Bernhardt raised her liquid eyes to the Promethean inventor, and there could be no mistaking the fact that her passion was more than spiritual.

Tesla flinched almost imperceptibly. He could pass ten-thousand volts through his body without pain, but the great actress's frank regard seemed to tax his circuits.

"I believe," said Vivekananda, keenly aware of the chemistry, "that there is only *one* duality which truly confounds us ... that between *Prana* -- the force that animates -- and *Akasha* -- the mass which is animated. When Mr. Maxwell demonstrated the unity of electricity and magnetism, I believe he took the first step to union. Now, if it can be demonstrated that both force and matter are reducible to potential energy ..."

There was a lengthy pause as Tesla rubbed his temple and the others murmured in attempt to glean the Swami's meaning. The February wind rattled the crystal-paned French doors which led to the Corbett's patio garden. Tesla glanced up at the sound, his eyes fixing on an electric lantern, newly installed on the patio and flickering.

"I am not entirely sure," he said, his head still turned away, "given our humble assets of mind, that such an equivalance can be found. *Matter*, it seems to me, remains resolutely inert until moved or infused by force. As for man, energy may inspire him to occasional heights, but at root, he is an automaton."

"Would you say this even of Christ?" James queried. "And of yourself, man?"

"Christ is another matter altogether," Tesla replied, "and I ... have been proven mortal by my critics." He stood, drew a cigar from his inside pocket, and turned to Mrs. Corbett. "May I ... make brief use of your patio, Madame?"

"Of course, Mr. Tesla," she answered. "But you are perfectly welcome to smoke here. It's bitterly cold ..."

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“That may be just the tonic I need, Mrs. Corbett,” he said, and with a bow to both inner and outer circles, he stepped coatless into the night.

With Tesla’s chair empty, there was left a void of mind which in itself gave the lie to his modest self-assessment. Try as they might, the Corbetts could not fill it with a fresh round of drinks or with banter about Bernhardt’s next theatrical undertaking. As for the Swami, he remained seated, but for all purposes left the room by entering a meditative state. It was my great-grandfather’s strong impression that he was, by some means, in direct communion with Tesla, for each time Vivekananda filled his lungs, he saw the inventor’s shoulders rise and his head tilt more to the stars. There was a singular moment when all conversation ceased and the party turned to watch Tesla blow a smoke ring toward Polaris. Soon after that, he returned.

Or perhaps he did not.

By my great-granddad’s account, all present saw Nikola Tesla retake his seat, and heard the Swami ask him the inscrutable question, “Do they still take tea at four?”

Then something occurred which caused a woman to faint, a gentleman to drop his drink, and gave the excitable Corbett sisters good reason to believe that their plush parlor was a sanctuary for sprites.

The patio door creaked open, an arctic gust rattled the crystal chandelier, and Tesla stepped in for a second time, crossing the room to claim his empty chair.

“I do apologize,” he said, rolling the cigar between thumb and forefinger. “Some ideas blossom only in starlight ...”

There was weighted silence, the cause of which seemed lost on Tesla. It was Professor James, beholding even the supernatural with an empiricist’s cool eye, who broke the spell and restored the time domain.

“Good God, man,” he said. “You speak as a materialist, but your predilections ... not to say your unusual talents ... seem those of a vitalist.”

“The two are forever at war in me,” Tesla replied, with a dry laugh.

The Swami looked up, only now stirring from his reverie. “In your study of the Vedas, Mr. Tesla, did you happen to encounter the *Kalpa* sutras? *Kalpa* is what urges us to the higher path. To find our --”

“*Raison d’etre*,” Bernhardt said softly, her eyes lit as if by phantom footlights.

“In a fashion,” said Vivekananda. “It concerns the actions we perform each day ... in our private laboratories, so to speak ... which fulfill God’s highest purpose.”

Tesla took a sip of his whiskey and faced the Swami. His voice was pitched high

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with excitement, clear of ambivalence. "It may not be possible," he said, "in view of the very obstructions to perception you've cited, to provide *experimental* proof of the equivalence of energy and matter. Indeed, such a practical demonstration might unleash forces too awful to imagine. But I believe a *mathematical* proof is attainable. This would give scientific foundation to your insight. I shall derive such a proof, or die trying. I shall do my best to read the mind of God."

Vivekananda said nothing, but stood and offered his hand. Tesla rose from his chair and accepted it, and the room erupted in applause, a much needed release of tension. William James and Sarah Bernhardt joined them, and Mrs. Corbett offered an ebullient toast to "a new age in which science and the spiritual path would be joined."

As with dreams, as with all our small, daily glimpses of the numinous, the unfolding that night of a foreign dimension in the Corbett's salon was soon forgotten by most of the guests. Those for whom the sensation of the marvelous lingered were inclined to put it down to drink, or to the "animal magnetism" of such large personalities. But my great-grandfather could not shake it, and it troubled him to his death. "There are doors in time," he wrote. "And I saw Tesla walk through one of them."

Tesla never delivered Swami Vivekananda the mathematical proof he had vowed that night to find, a proof which nine years later established the reputation of a young patent clerk named Albert Einstein. Perhaps he was simply unable to wrap his methodical inventor's mind around a reality so abstruse, or maybe, as my great-grandfather asserted before he died, Tesla had glimpsed through a portal in time the horror of Hiroshima, and opted not to throw such a pearl before swine. It is clear, however, that the elusive *mass-energy* infused his later work, particularly his prescient research in what is now called plasma physics, as well as his quixotic campaign for free energy, an idea which hastened his professional exile. He died penniless and alone, but fully his own man, ever mindful of the calling the Swami had given him. Perhaps one day, a door will open, and Tesla will take his place in the parlor once again.

An intriguing story is sometimes heard in scientific circles. Though I can't affirm its verity, it has a ring of truth. According to it, Einstein's famous equation, $E=mc^2$, made its debut as $E=M$ in the margins of an early draft of his *Special Theory of Relativity*, written in the hand of his Hungarian wife, Mileva, a scientist in her own right. Nikola

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Tesla and Mileva Maric had been correspondents for years, a friendship which may have dated from Tesla's youthful studies in Budapest. I cannot help but wonder, in light of my great-granddad's account, if the Corbett's "curio supper" did not extend its reach beyond the boundaries of Manhattan Island, defying space as well as time. Swami Vivekananda himself died three years shy of Einstein's breakthrough, finally succumbing to a lifelong stomach ailment, but I am inclined to believe, with my ancestor, that death is of little consequence if the forms we inhabit are merely "corks on the water." Swamiji's insight had been given wings which may yet, as Sarah Bernhardt imagined, lift mankind above its fallen state. And Tesla, dear Tesla, regards us from that vantage.

Author's End Note: The foregoing was conceived and written as historical fiction; all dialogue is either wholly invented or extrapolated from the published writings and correspondence of the principals. That a supper of the sort depicted did happen, and that Swami Vivekananda did there propose to Nikola Tesla that he formulate the equivalence of mass and energy are matters of historical record, as is the fact that Sarah Bernhardt was both present and much taken with Tesla. As for Einstein's equation, it did not appear in the initial printing of the Special Relativity Theory, but in a supplementary paper published a few months later. Beyond the records indicating a pre-existing correspondence between Tesla and Mileva Maric, little is known. Readers who have an interest in these matters are encouraged to explore Margaret Cheney's biography, Tesla: Man Out Of Time (as well as her comments on the PBS website, www.pbs.org/tesla), Marie Louise Burke's comprehensive Swami Vivekananda In The West (spec. v. 3), The Complete Works Of Vivekananda (v. 5), and the books and web materials of physicist Evan Harris Walker, who has written extensively on the little-known legacy of Mrs. Einstein, as well as on the quantum (and non-local) nature of consciousness.

