

## **The First Two Pages of “Mr. Tesla Likes to Watch” by Joseph D’Agnese**

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An Essay by Joseph D’Agnese

Did you know Mark Twain and Nikola Tesla were friends? Neither did I. Some years ago, my wife and I came across a photo of the two of them in Tesla’s lab in New York City.

Twain occupies the foreground of the image. The room is dark. The only source of light is the white ball of electricity Twain appears to be cradling in the palms of his hands. Tesla’s face emerges from the shadows, just over Twain’s right shoulder. You can’t tell what Tesla’s doing way over there. But you can assume that he’s somehow controlling the light. The hidden puppet-master of sizzling electrons.

Ever since I saw that image, I was taken with the idea of working them into a story. I usually don’t write historical mysteries, but these two friends were too good to pass up.

“Mr. Tesla Likes to Watch” is 5,300 words and told in eight sections. I knew from the beginning that the story would be built along the lines of an old Sherlock Holmes story. As I first envisioned it, the first scene would be the “client” presenting his “case” to Twain and Tesla and begging them to help him.

The mystery is deliberately small. Someone is sabotaging a florist's arrangements, and his business is deteriorating. After the client leaves, Twain and Tesla make a gentlemen's wager. Whoever cracks the case buys the other dinner at Delmonico's, a famous New York dinner palace of the era.

The final scene, as I envisioned it, had to be Twain and Tesla deconstructing how they each went about solving the mystery. I thought it would be great fun. Twain's an intuitive thinker. Tesla's a methodical, fastidious researcher. Who would win out? Who becomes the Sherlock—and who unwittingly ends up the Watson?

I was enthralled with the idea, but drafting that first scene with the client revealed the fatal flaw in my thinking. Yes, all those Holmes stories are bookended with long stretches of talk. Those client scenes are all talk. And, usually, so is Sherlock's big reveal at the end. I desperately needed action. Otherwise the story would bog down in the ceaseless chatter of two men.

I hit on the idea of inserting three short action scenes at critical points in the story. These short bits would all show Tesla conducting his investigation. And they would allow me to illustrate the solution—and the truth at the center of the story—without spelling it out through dialogue. The third and last action scene arrives in the story exactly when we need to deliver the final twist—one which Tesla anticipated but which Twain never saw coming.

I won't reveal that secret here. Suffice to say that the key to writing an effective historical mystery is to have its crux revolve around something that is commonplace today but taboo, shocking, or illegal in the era in which the story takes place.

Here's the opening.

By six o'clock in the afternoon, as the traffic on **Sixth Avenue** grew to a tumult of screeching streetcars, **horse-drawn cabs** and trucks, the driver of the delivery van walked the **bay mare** through the **brick archway** that faced **West 26th Street**.

**Tesla** watched. **Obsession** compelled him.

The driver was tall, broad-shouldered, with gentle hands. He gently stroked the **horse's** muzzle as he led her back to the **stable** for the night. A few minutes later, the driver emerged on foot. **Tesla tailed him** back to the **flower district**, where the man disappeared into another alley—one that led to a small **cobblestone**-lined courtyard behind the **flower shop**.

Here, the store's delivery van shimmered in the late September light. It was black enamel, with the name of the shop etched onto its sides in gold paint.

Tesla surveyed the traffic, then dashed across the street.

He ducked into the alley.

Thus began his **sixth day of research**.

Sorry, Sir Arthur. I couldn't wait for the all-important client scene to get things started. The first action scene occurs out of its proper order in the story's chronological timeline. It's set before we even know what the mystery is. Indeed, Tesla's investigation is already in its sixth day!

All we know is that someone named Tesla is spying on some dude. Why? We have no idea. But we do know that this is an era when horses propel mass transit and delivery vans. It's an era of cobblestone streets and "horse walks"—an architectural arch built into the facades of buildings that allowed people to walk their steeds

through. We don't really know what city this is, but *maybe* the fact that there's a whole district devoted to flowers or that the streets are numbered gives us a feeling that we're in New York.

I didn't give the reader Tesla's forename. I was banking on the reader knowing exactly which Tesla I was talking about and to realize from that fact alone that they were about to read One of Those Stories. That is, one in which historical characters are used fictionally.

The modern website White Pages lists more than 100 Teslas now living in the USA, and one of them is actually named Nikola. Ancestry.com lists the birth, death, and census records of even more Teslas throughout US history—migrating to these shores from places like Italy, Austria, Germany, and, of course, the former Yugoslavia. But who are we kidding? There's only one obsessive Tesla a writer would identify by surname alone.

I don't reveal until much later in the story that the precise year is 1893. Why that year? I consulted timelines of Twain and Tesla's lives, and I think it's a safe bet that the two men could have been in New York City at the same time during that year. This was complicated by the fact that during this time Twain and his family were living in Europe, where, believe it or not, one could then live more frugally than in the United States. Twain was pinching pennies after a series of bad investments, but he did get back to the states from time to time.

After a line break, we finally get our client scene. And yes, I do start with the weather. Sir Arthur, I know you're pleased. But Mr. Leonard would like a word with you.

Autumn that year had been guilty of a treacherous fickleness. A welcome pair of warm days were brutally annihilated by crisp ones in quick succession. Six days ago they'd had the sort of morning best enjoyed in front of a warm fire. The butler escorted the visitor out of doors to the second-story porch of the Players Club that overlooked Gramercy Park, then fled with a shudder. The porch was occupied by three upholstered chairs, two of them taken.

Actually, the weather and the autumn setting are critical and intertwined. Later in the story, the weather has to be so warm that one of the characters will feel compelled to perform outdoor work shirtless. But the story still has to be set in the *fall* of 1893, not spring or summer, because Twain wouldn't have been in New York then. At least, I don't think he would have been.

This is the weird thing about playing with real-life historical characters. You are constantly picking and choosing which facts you're going to stick to, and which you will blithely ignore. If the whole thing is make-believe, why can't I just set the story at a time of year that's convenient for *me*? I don't have a good answer for that. I only know that I feel compelled to honor some facts, and fudge others.

Notice I don't spell out any real physical details of the Players Club on Gramercy Park. It's a real-life social club that was devoted to actors and others

working in the arts. Twain and Tesla were members, probably brought into the fold by a mutual actor friend.

The club still exists to this day. I used to walk past it from time to time when I worked in New York, and I'd always find myself stopping to admire the building itself. It's got beautiful wrought- or cast-iron railings, a second-story porch, and still-functioning gas lamps. I wasted a lot of time in an earlier draft trying to fit in those lovely details, but I figured by now the reader has a sense of the era and is craving plot. No such luck. We still have to meet our characters.

In one, a tweed-clad man sat slouched and cross-legged with an arm slung over the back of the chair, puffing away at a thick **cigar**. His **thick hair** was nearly as **unkempt** as his **mustache**. Tesla sat stiffly in the other chair. He was a taller, **neater**, black-haired man in a prim gray suit, rail-thin, who held his head and shoulders completely erect. Each time the wind sent smoke into his face, his shoulders rocked gently to the side, the way a mountain might evade storm clouds.

Twain is unnamed in his first appearance, identified only as an unkempt cigar-smoker. His slouching posture contrasts Tesla's fastidious appearance. I've known of Twain my whole life. He's a larger-than-life figure that everyone thinks they know. But I didn't actually know much about the quirks of his personality before I researched him for this story. I was impressed with his affection for his wife and daughters and surprised by his love for cats. I remember as a kid reading the autobiography of Norman Rockwell, who, when hired to illustrate Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, traveled to Twain's hometown in Missouri to see the author's boyhood home. Rockwell realized

that Twain's description of Tom crawling out of his bedroom window at night—the exact details, the drainpipe, all of it—conformed exactly to the specifics of Twain's own home.

Strangely, I knew a lot more about Tesla thanks to a book I once reviewed: *Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World* by the historian Jill Jonnes. Tesla really was an oddball, ruled by bizarre phobias.

The thought of Twain and Tesla being friends calls to mind that old *Vanity Fair* photo of Kurt Vonnegut and Tom Wolfe perched on a lifeguard chair at the beach. Wolfe's dapper as ever in his trademark white suit, while everything Vonnegut is wearing could be described as rumpled—right down his ratty old sneakers.

Here's our client, young Mr. Hobbs, a local florist.

Judging by their visitor's flushed cheeks, he'd enjoyed a brisk walk on his way to the club. He was clad in a brown suit with a gray woolen overcoat that announced its wearer's keen appreciation of fashion, as did the elegant white **tuberose** which clung to his lapel. He had a pink, unlined face adorned with a mustache that desperately wished to convey its owner's gravitas. This was difficult, as he was probably no more than twenty-two years of age.

The only thing relevant here is the flower. Throughout history flowers have been used as symbols to express very specific emotions. Today we all know that red roses signify love and that lilies are appropriate in funeral arrangements. But the Victorian era raised coded floral communication to an art form. Entire dictionaries were

compiled to instruct people on the proper meaning of flowers. In my story, Tesla alone digs into “the language of flowers,” which helps him crack the case.

For my research, I confined myself to flower dictionaries that could have been read in 1893. On the Internet Archive, I found one such book that I envisioned Tesla reading. It’s an 1851 title, *The Floral Offering: A Token of Affection and Esteem; Comprising the Language and Poetry of Flowers* by Henrietta Dumont. In that 300-page text, Dumont informs us that the tuberose signifies *dangerous pleasures* or *dangerous love*. That, in a nutshell, is the unspoken problem facing the client. Each time Hobbs appears, he’s wearing a different flower, but I chose not to spell out each flower’s meanings. They are just tucked into the story, waiting for some dedicated reader to decode. So there’s one left for you to ferret out.

We’re coming up on the end of our two pages.

“I apologize, young man,” the cigar-smoker said with a drawl. “Mr. Tesla adheres to a brand of **medical faddism** that determines the unfortunate site of our meeting.”

His tall companion rolled his eyes. “So long as Mr. Clemens chooses to **poison** the atmosphere and his lungs with his **noxious weed**, we are wise to take in the most bracing aspects that the weather affords.” His voice was tinged with a frothy **accent** which—to American ears—suggested the realms of impoverished European noblemen. “Now, Mr. Hobbs. We’re told you have a story.”

A-ha! Twain and Tesla finally speak—and the playful nature of their relationship is already obvious. This is the shtick, if you will, that they will maintain



throughout the story. I have no idea if they did mock each other's habits this way, but it gave me a way to explore their contrasts. Twain bought the cheapest cigars possible, smoked a ton of them, and usually left the house to avoid annoying his wife with his smoke.

The real Tesla avoided alcohol and tobacco and countless other things that he was convinced would kill him. I don't know how Tesla could enjoy any meal at any New York restaurant in that era. He detested rich sauces, and Delmonico's—where the two sleuths later dine—practically invented them. It was a delight to scroll through old menus online, thinking to myself, "If I were a phobic Serbian genius, what would I order?"

I briefly toyed with the notion of comparing Tesla's accent to Count Dracula's, but when I listened to online audio files of Serbians speaking English, I didn't think the comparison was apt. Which is fine, because I wouldn't have been able to use that comparison anyway. Bram Stoker's book wasn't published until four years after our story takes place. Funny to think about: in 1893, even the most literate American would have no idea who Dracula was!

Page two ends with the client finally telling his story. A mention of his wife's relations prompts a Dad joke from Twain:

"In a manner of speaking. I'm not a man of wealth, gentlemen, but I am fortunate to enjoy the love of a good woman. My Sally hails from a prominent Albany family. Her father's a state senator of some renown,

with a finger in many pies. Her uncle was a noted pomologist, which is how I entered her social circle and came to love her.”

“Golly gee, I do so love pomology,” Clemens waxed.

Tesla tapped the young man’s knee. “You will find he is often jestful. But I assure you he absorbs and ponders every word. Please—proceed.”

And Tesla gets to play the straight man, as he will throughout the story.

I enjoyed dipping into historical research in order to write the story. New York is probably the only large city I know well enough to write about, and I’m fascinated by its history. But I’m not a historian, so none of this stuff comes easy to me. As a result, I am constantly reminded of how my meager skills fall short.

For example, in the story, I missed the chance to comment on the nascent world of electric light. What a missed opportunity! New York City was not the first in the world or even the USA to begin using electric light. In 1880, a stretch of Broadway was illuminated with electric streetlamps. Two years later, a firm owned by Edison began supplying electricity to a few privileged residents. The transition from gas to electric would take decades, well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But in 1892—one year before my story takes place—Edison’s firm installed beautiful cast-iron lamp posts all along Fifth Avenue. Tesla’s studio was located on that famous upscale thoroughfare. No doubt Tesla saw those lamp posts on his countless walks. How did the father of alternating current (AC) react upon beholding his business rival’s creations? Was he irritated, fascinated, enraged? I’m sure true historians know or can intelligently

speculate about that question. It might have been fun to play with Tesla's feelings on the matter, but it never occurred to me.

Also in my story, I say that the Players Club played host to the city's growing class of Bohemians. That's true, but at the time I was writing, I hadn't begun to grasp the full story. I'm currently writing *another* New York historical mystery, set thirty years before this one, closer to the *true* birth of New York's artistic/literary set.

Lastly, I have a bad habit of over-researching. So as I write these pieces, I must keep reminding myself that the economy of short stories means that any great factoids I turn up will most likely end up on the cutting room floor. Unless, of course, I write an essay like this. Thanks for indulging my own Tesla-like obsessions.

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