

FOUR SHORT STORIES ABOUT NIKOLA TESLA WHICH YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD

Compiled and edited by **Dr. Majda Djordjevic**

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How Macak, the Cat, introduced Electricity to Tesla

Tesla had very warm memories about his childhood. His best friend was a huge cat “Macak” who followed Nikola like a dog, wherever he went. Nikola’s foe was a hostile goose, the queen of the backyard. Whenever Nikola stepped into her realm, she chased him attempting to pinch his tush. Many times, Macak saved Nikola from that combative goose. During dark winter evenings, Nikola and Macak used to snuggle together by the stove. Although Nikola was only 3 years old, he was already very observant and interested in everything that was happening in nature. He told the following story about his first immediate encounter with electricity, which happened in 1859: “Now, I must tell you of a strange experience which in my later life bore the fruit. We had a cold snap, even drier than before. People walking in the snow left a luminous trail. As I stroked Macak's back, it became a sheet of light and my hand produced a shower of sparks. My father remarked: “This is nothing but electricity, the same thing you see on the trees in a storm.” My mother seemed alarmed. She said: “Stop playing with the cat, he might start a fire.” I was thinking abstractly. Is nature a cat? If so, who strokes its back? It can only be God, I concluded. I cannot exaggerate the effect of this marvelous sight on my childish imagination. Day after day I asked myself “What is electricity?” and found no answer. Eighty years have gone by since and I still ask the same question, unable to answer it.” (1939)

That question was present all the time in Tesla’s life. As a young electrical engineer, already being aware of the enormous significance of electricity, he said: ”A day when we shall know exactly what electricity is, will chronicle an event probably greater, more important than any other recorded in the history of human race. Then it will be a mere question of time when men will succeed in attaching their machinery to the very real work of nature and see the excitement coming.” (1892)

Only 4 years later, the hydroelectric power station at Niagara Falls became operational. It was based on 13 patents, 9 of which were Tesla’s. Lord Kelvin said at its inauguration:

“It is a product of unfathomable mystery of the mind”. He also said at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia: “Tesla has contributed more to electrical science than any man up to his time.” (1896)

Obsessed by Flying

Another story from Tesla’s childhood: His father was an educated man and an erudite. He possessed quite a rich home library. To Nikola, who learned to read very early, it was a treasure chest. Nikola slept 2-4 hours only and while everyone else in the family was asleep, he read book after book, by the candlelight, in spite of his mother being afraid that it may spoil his eyesight. His favourite author was Leonardo da Vinci who, among other interests, studied birds’ wings attempting to construct a contraption which would enable humans to fly. He also predicted a helicopter. Reading about that, Nikola became obsessed by flying. His first attempt was to jump from the barn, holding his father’s umbrella. Fortunately, the only victim of that unsuccessful but daring experiment, was the umbrella. Next, Nikola constructed a pair of wings of branches, ropes, and cardboard. His secret “workshop” was in the church tower. The first windy day was an opportunity for Nikola to try his contraption. He climbed the nearby hill, attached the wings to his shoulders and arms and ran downhill vigorously flapping the wings. Although, he was not successful, he never abandoned that idea. The result was his group of patents pertaining to the vertical take off and landing (VTOL) airplane (1928). Currently, such airplanes exist in the military fleets of US (V-20) and Great Britain (Harrier Jump Jet). Tesla also predicted jet aircrafts by substituting propellers with bladeless turbines, another of his patents.

Tesla and Mark Twain

Tesla had many friends in New York. Some of them were very distinguished public figures. Among them was Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), a famous writer and humourist. Tesla used to read his books as a child, admired him very much and later, in 1890 they developed a special friendship, which lasted until Twain passed on. Tesla remembered that when he contracted cholera, in 1874, he was reading the early work of Mark Twain and stated: “It was the first work of Mark Twain to which I owe the miraculous recovery that followed. It was so captivating as to make me utterly forget my hopeless state. Twenty-five years later, when I met Mr. Clemens and when we became

friends, I told him about my experience and with astonishment I watched the great master of laughing, crying.”

Twain visited Tesla’s laboratory quite often and enjoyed taking part in some experiments. He said: “What a wonderful life has this man!” On one of those occasions Tesla and his assistants tested a mechanical oscillator. Twain got very interested and asked to step on its platform and experience the oscillations (vibrations). It was very exciting, and Twain urged them to increase the intensity of vibrations. Tesla, knowing that Twain had sensitive bowels, tried to talk him out of it but Twain insisted. The unpleasant consequence was that Twain had to run to the bathroom.

Tesla in British Columbia

It is not very well known that Tesla spent some time in British Columbia. In 1897, three gold mines in Rossland, BC, changed their two million dollars order for Edison’s direct current (DC) motors and cable system to Tesla’s alternating current (AC) cable and electric winding motors, to power mine hoist cable systems. That was an enormous gamble as Tesla’s motors had not been tested practically on such a large system, prior to the installation. The AC was obtained from a dam on the Kootenay River, 35 km from Rossland. Tesla was so thrilled that he came personally to that area to set up a test laboratory at Cascade (now Christina Lake) on a small weir on the Kettle River. There was a crude AC generator, so he was able to carry out 3 months of testing. The result was that once the project was finished, everything worked perfectly.

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There are so many stories and anecdotes from Tesla’s life, that it is very challenging to make a limited selection. Therefore, I would like to keep the readers in suspense until my next opportunity to tell about some lesser known deeds and events from the extraordinary life of the unique genius, Nikola Tesla.