

THE BELIEVER



LIVING WITH THE ATOMIC BOMB

*A glimpse inside a top-secret government
nuclear facility on the eve of the cold war*

by **MILLICENT G. DILLON**



THE EASY MATTER OF BEING DECEIVED

America's most influential illusionist

by **CHARITY VOGEL**



THE AUDUBON OF THE TRAMP WORLD

*An insider's tale reveals the surprisingly
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by **ROBERT ITO**



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AND:
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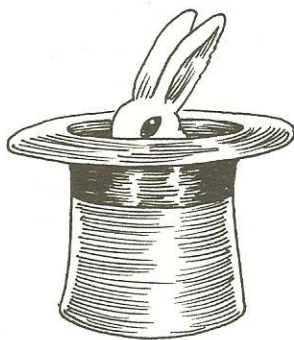
CHARITY VOGEL

THE FOREFATHER OF CHARM

THE RISE AND FALL OF AMERICA'S MOST INFLUENTIAL ILLUSIONIST

DISCUSSED: *Nashville's Best Millinery Shop, The Indoor Firing of Muskets, Hayseed Towns, Mendicants, The Dean of American Magicians, Itinerant Medicine Peddling, Snappy Patter, The Failure to Acknowledge Satan's Majesty, Avian Menageries, White Slaves, Greenbacks, Female Extortionists, Justice for Humbuggery, The Divergent Lives of Sons*

I. HAT TRICK



One night in the mid-1800s, in Nashville's Masonic Hall, a man billing himself as "the Genuine Fakir of Ava" brought his card tricks and fast-paced patter to a halt. To continue his show, he announced, he would need the help of a lady from the crowd. Where, he asked the audience, might the most prominent lady in Nashville be seated?

The audience turned toward Sarah Childress Polk, widow of the eleventh U.S. president, James K. Polk, and a longtime resident of Tennessee. The Fakir of Ava

asked Mrs. Polk to entrust to him the new French bonnet she wore, the one purchased that day at Nashville's most exclusive millinery shop. Cautiously, she yielded to his request. First, the Fakir dropped the hat into a footlight,

wherein it briefly caught fire. He tore the smoking fabric and flowers into scraps, which he then loaded into a gun and fired at the ceiling, blizzarding the crowd with blackened hat bits and filling the hall with smoke.

The Fakir, nonchalant, passed out slips of paper and asked each person to write down a place where the hat might be located. Placing the slips into a black bag, the Fakir extended it to Sarah Polk. She picked one.

It read, "The clapper of the bell in the steeple of the Methodist church."

The city's mayor and a committee of citizens rushed to the nearby church and back again, bearing their prize: a hatbox, which they had found hanging from the clapper of the church bell by a ribbon. It contained Sarah Polk's hat, identical in every particular except for one small detail, unnoticeable to the crowd: the presence of the maker's label within the hatband.

The effect of this illusion on the audience, it was later noted, was "profound." To the Fakir of Ava, the man who was one of the mid-nineteenth century's most famous magicians, and—if you trace such lineages, as magicians do—the forefather of American magic, through a bloodline that would run from Harry Kellar to Harry Houdini and Howard Thurston, on to the best and most daring of modern-day illusionists, it was all in an evening's work.

For her part, Sarah Polk—either because she was fooled, or because she wasn't—always maintained that the hat she got back was better than the one she had worn to the show.

II. THE ILLUSIONIST PREPARES

In an age in which show-business careers were built through countless live repetitions of complicated shows mastered over long periods of trial and error, then dispensed from the buckboards of wagons rumbling from one hay-

seed town to another—until at last the theaters in big cities like Philadelphia could be filled with paying customers—the original Fakir, Isaiah H. Hughes, built his show-business success the hard way: one performance at a time.

Hughes did public magic shows, and he did them better than nearly everyone else. Hughes soon became so famous that he had to protect his name from imposters; countless fake "Fakirs" popped up during the course of his career, some even going so far as to label themselves from "Ava," at which point Hughes obstinately inserted the word *Genuine* into his title and handbills. (Hughes himself had taken the name, possibly from a previous and lesser-known magician, for its obvious air of exoticism and romance; a *fakir* is a mendicant or holy man, and *Ava* was a place in Burma that sounded mysterious. Plus, it was short enough for posters and programs.) In February 1870, Hughes wrote a testy letter to one Buffalo newspaper defending his reputation as "the only 'Fakir of Ava.'" "I would state," Hughes wrote, "that the only value the name possesses is what I have made it."

He was right. For thousands of Americans, the stage show or street magic performed by the Fakir of Ava served as an introduction to the art of professional illusion—and, sometimes, to the work of professional entertainers of any type. He brought stardust to backwoods areas where the idea of celebrity was unknown. Other performers wanted to learn from him, to travel with him, to perform on the same stage as he

did. Later magicians would proudly boast of any connection with him: "The historian of magic can trace an unbroken line of succession," proclaimed a dean of American magicians, Howard Thurston, in 1930, "from the Fakir of Ava in 1830 to my own entertainment... today."

Isaiah Harris Hughes's own line of succession, however, linked him to the illusion-free past of hard-scrabble parents who had to scrimp and work for a living. Hughes, who was born in 1810 in England, spent his earliest years, according to various accounts, in either the county of Essex, to the east, or in the city of Liverpool. When Hughes was still a boy, his family emigrated to New York City. America suited young Isaiah better in every respect. It offered him endless scope for the one thing he had plenty of: imagination.

In New York, Hughes attended public school for a few years before turning to work, selling shoes in the Bowery. While the job was miserable, Hughes learned that he had a gift for selling, and turned his talents to hawking patent medicine. (Among others, William Avery Rockefeller, the rough-and-tumble father of John D. Rockefeller, would support his large family as an itinerant medicine peddler in this same mid-century period.) Selling liquids and powders off the back of a wagon or from the top of a soapbox, Hughes honed the skills he would put to use as an illusionist: the ability to read a crowd quickly and faultlessly, the way to time one's patter so as to hold attentions rapt, the value of charm and personal-

ity. Traveling the rural back roads of the northeast, Hughes made the selling of patent medicines his college of stagecraft.

One of his biggest assets was his commanding presence. Big-boned and muscular, Hughes was taller than almost anyone, standing well over six feet. He didn't try to hide his size, instead standing "straight as an arrow" in public, wearing capes and turbans and high hats to accentuate his stature, and walking with a long, firm stride. Hughes's visage was eye-catching, too. He was olive-skinned—some called him "swarthy"—with glittering dark eyes. He wore his black hair curled loosely around his brow and ears, and had a devilish way of furrowing his eyebrows.

It didn't take Hughes long to realize where his *true* abilities lay: with the rapid-fire card tricks and snappy patter he used to lure his customers. So Hughes gambled on his talent. He exchanged his medicine cart for a floor-sweeping, richly embroidered robe, and mastered his first few illusions, sleights of hand that he invented or figured out on his own. Soon he was ready to embark on the career for which he had been born. He became the Fakir of Ava.

III. THE EASY MATTER OF BEING DECEIVED

Early in his career, Isaiah Hughes discerned a key desire in American audiences: they wanted to be part of the act. Hughes made sure to involve in his deceptions some of the men and women in the crowds that

watched him perform. His act was primitive at first: disappearing objects, "growths" of flower bouquets, tricks with mirrors and scarves. As he got better and more confident, the illusions deepened.

He blasted pocket watches out of guns, then reassembled them with a wave of his hand; turned paper shavings into coffee and milk; vanished and reappeared ladies' hats. He mastered ventriloquism. Once, in May 1846, while in Pittsburgh preparing for a series of shows, Hughes donned his cloak and made his way to a public market. Approaching a farmer, Hughes inquired loudly if his eggs were fresh. Before the astonished farmer could reply, a local newspaper later reported, the eggs began "chirping like a thousand crickets." Then they jiggled and shimmied about before the delighted eyes of onlookers. "The Devil must be in that box of eggs!" one observer marveled.

As people streamed into Hughes's shows, he began filling large halls and charging proper admission. (By 1868, it would cost a quarter to see him—the equivalent of thirty dollars in today's economy—although a group of five could get in for a dollar.) Standing-room-only crowds were the norm. Sometimes, people even followed him from town to town, like he was a prophet or an apostle. "A fellow, calling himself the 'Fakir of Ava' came through here the other day with a boy and girl proposing to give a grand scientific entertainment to the inhabitants of Chapel Hill," one North Carolina man, William Bagley, wrote to an associate

in 1845. "The next morning he left having made some forty or fifty dollars at the expense of the students, several of them followed him to Hillsboro...." People felt comfortable with Hughes, because while he professed magic as his art, he didn't hint at any connections to a diabolical or dark side, the way that later generations of magicians would (see show posters for Thurston or Kellar). "The Fakir does not profess any connection with his Satanic Majesty," an Oswego newspaper informed readers in 1864. "But he will illustrate to the satisfaction of all who attend that it is a very easy matter to be deceived, and that a man's hands are quicker than other people's eyes."

The adulation was sweet, the money sweeter. After a while, the Fakir found he had a taste for nice things; growing rich, he was able to indulge it. He bought eye-popping gems and wore them set into a snow white silk turban that he wore on his head, along with a crescent-moon symbol made out of gold. He owned several large pieces of property in Buffalo, where he lived in a succession of stately city homes. He began collecting exotic birds: golden and silver pheasants, a flock of brilliant peacocks. He also collected magpies. His avian menagerie was housed in a giant birdcage, one hundred feet long and twenty wide, that ran along one border of his estate's rolling lawn. As visitors walked up to his door, they passed this "museum of feathered creatures" that, some whispered, could forecast the weather in the Great Lakes region better than any almanac. The "shrill

cries" of the peacocks were a sure token of rain and snow.

Hughes liked Buffalo, his adopted hometown. Brash and bare-knuckled in the mid-1800s, as it blossomed from a Great Lakes port into the Erie Canal's terminus and powerful gateway to the nation's West, Buffalo suited the personal style of the Fakir. He immediately assumed a role as one of the town's prominent citizens. For its part, the strapping, roiling young city—which in the mid-1800s was attracting the likes of Mark Twain, and producing show-business talents including the Davenport Brothers and the Sutherland Sisters—received Hughes with admiration and applause. His excesses mirrored the zeitgeist of his place, profession, and time. When Hughes rode into Buffalo for the first time inside an elaborately decorated carriage pulled by four fine horses, driven by a "white slave" in full costume, he was an immediate sensation. Exits and entrances: as the Fakir had always known, they made the show.

IV. BEDROOM FURNITURE AND A HALF TON OF COAL

Isaiah Hughes likely never heard the term *public relations*, and he would have dismissed it if he had. But he did know a thing or two about attracting audiences and keeping them riveted. He had a gift for relating to people, especially in crowds. If he hadn't gone into magic, Hughes could have made a fine circus ringmaster or revival preacher.

Among his other insights,

Hughes knew that people liked to feel that they were getting a good value, even where entertainment was concerned. So he turned his shows into double and triple bills, teaming up with popular humorists like John W. Whiston, ventriloquists, and novelty acts. It was vaudeville, in a sense, before vaudeville. In particular, Whiston, who would later perform with P. T. Barnum's circus, won raves for his light-hearted comedy. "Whiston is inimitable," wrote one Lowell, Massachusetts, newspaper. Paired during the 1860s with the Fakir's polished and somberly shaded show, the magic and comedy double feature made for a balanced, satisfying evening. "Whiston will appear in two new characters," Buffalo newspapers informed eager theatergoers at the start of the duo's 1869 tour. "'Patience Softbeech in Search of a Husband' and the 'Belle of Long Branch'—without the Grecian bend."

But that was only the beginning. As his forty-year stage career entered its middle phase, Hughes came up with his stroke of genius. His bright idea was the "gift show," and it became his trademark piece of showmanship—as well as his legacy for generations of performers. A precursor to today's lotteries and TV game shows (come on down and win a new motor home!), as well as of many a church-lawn fete, Hughes's scheme was simple: He turned his shows into prize-giveaways as well as performances. For the price of one ticket, audience members got two thrills: the shiver of witnessing his illusions, and the chance to win one of a number of generous prizes.

And the giveaways were indeed exciting, chosen by Hughes to get people talking well in advance of the show. Sacks of flour; fanciful items of ladies' clothing; sewing machines; half tons of coal; complete sets of bedroom furniture; pianos and melodeons; packets of forty dollars "in greenbacks"—the Fakir saw that all of it was handed out to lucky winners with as much splash as possible. The prizes were often displayed ahead of time, cannily, in local shopwindows, or in the lobby of the theater where Hughes would be performing. Hughes wanted to create a buzz that would last long after he left town, trailing clouds of glory—and he surmised, accurately, that the prize shows would generate much coverage in newspapers the following day. "The \$75... Sewing Machine, which was the principal gift last night, was carried away by Mrs. O'Brien, No. 238 Perry Street," one paper reported after one of Hughes's gift shows. "This evening there will be a hundred gifts distributed." At some performances, the Fakir even gave away a healthy young pig—and made the winner carry the animal through the theater, squealing all the way out to the street, after claiming the prize. "He was the first to introduce the gift business in conjunction with a magic show and made a big fortune," Harry Kellar would later write of Hughes, "as he had the reputation of being an honest man who always gave a square deal."

Indeed, the gift shows revealed a side of Hughes's technique that helped propel him to the pinnacle

of American magicianship. He had an uncanny knack for understanding the way newspaper editors and journalists of the day behaved, and what they would respond to. Upon arriving in a new town, the Fakir would visit personally the offices of the local news outfits, clad in his cape and turban. He would talk to the reporters and editors, joke with them, and then launch into a few illusions. He'd pull a small bird or animal out of a man's ear, give the guys a laugh and a thrill, maybe even dispense a few free tickets to the show.

The result was predictable. The Fakir knew that his antics with the press would guarantee him a spot in the headlines of the papers on the following day. One newspaper in Maryland illustrated the Fakir's adeptness at manipulation in an 1847 story: "On Saturday last, the Fakir, happening to be in our office, mentioned a trick he had played upon a New Jersey Preacher, by drawing a pack of cards from his bosom." The trick was described in full. No doubt it drew more than a few people in to see the Fakir's show—which was Hughes's plan all the time. One newspaper, describing the gift shows, called Hughes "cleverer with his brain than with his hands" for coming up with the idea. It was high praise.

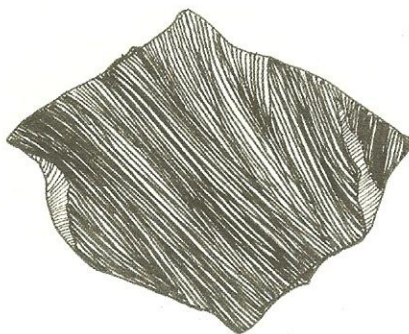
V. HEINRICH THE APPRENTICE

The Fakir had been seen by thousands; some watched him with especially admiring eyes. One who was so impressed—and who quickly decided

that he needed to follow the Fakir's career path—was a young man from Erie, Pennsylvania. Heinrich Kellar, still in his teens, had already started calling himself Harry, and had determined upon a life in magic.

Kellar doggedly pursued the Fakir of Ava as a mentor after seeing one of his shows. As one story goes, Kellar later saw an advertisement the Fakir had placed in upstate New York newspapers seeking an assistant, and traveled to Hughes's Buffalo doorstep to apply. That may have happened; or perhaps Kellar sought out Hughes on his own and presented his case. In any event, as Hughes edged into the later phase of his career, Kellar was by his side, soaking up his instruction and performing tricks with him at shows.

The aging Fakir, perhaps feeling the need to keep an eye on posterity, took Kellar under his wing, helping him practice illusions and master his stage presence. Hughes's own sons, Frank Fakir and Harry Ava, were not interested in magic, and the older magician may have seen a bit of himself in the ambitious young Kellar. "I was for a number of years assistant to the Fakir," Kellar would later write, in *Conjurors'*



Monthly magazine, "and afterwards took his place on the stage and gave the show under his direction."

In one account of their time together, Kellar describes how he overestimated his abilities and went out as a solo act too soon. Frustrated, and realizing his mistake, he went back to work under the Fakir. "The Fakir of Ava was more kind to me than before," Kellar said of that moment. Sometime later, the Fakir asked Kellar to run through his difficult tricks, and then told his protégé this: "You can do it, and you are equipped to start out for yourself." Kellar did—this time successfully.

Magicians trace their lineages, as blue bloods do, and Kellar eventually became known as the man who mentored and inspired the likes of Thurston and also Houdini, probably the most famous American magician of all time. In later life, Kellar called Hughes "the dear old Fakir" and professed a deep debt to him.

"You can trace magic shows just the same as you can families," said Thurston, the other leading magician of his generation, to a Rochester newspaper in 1930, "and I take considerable pride in my magical family tree." Thurston liked to draw a line from the Fakir of Ava to Kellar to his own career. "Some of the apparatus the Fakir of Ava used in his entertainments was passed on to Kellar," he said, "and in turn was delivered to my keeping.... I have three generations to my credit."

Thus, Isaiah Hughes, in a way, made Houdini possible; and through Houdini his influence reaches to the present day.

VI. THE FAKIR TAKES A WIFE

All magicians have dark sides, and Isaiah Hughes was no exception. Though he appeared polished in public, his private life was tumultuous and complicated.

For most of the years he was on the stage, Hughes traveled alone. There were signs he may have been married or in a domestic situation with a woman once earlier on in his life—some newspapers mention a first marriage and a son, both of which remain elusive in genealogical records and may never have existed—and he may have had entanglements with other women over money. In 1870, Hughes felt the need to write a public letter disassociating himself from a Chicago woman who was trying to extort money from him on the grounds that she was related to a prior magician who had used the same stage name. “In matters of *confederation* as well as those of *annexation*, I like to have my own choice,” Hughes wrote scathingly, the italics his own, “more particularly where the party in question is a *female*.”

By the 1870s, however, Hughes had decided to set himself up with a family. He became engaged to Sarah Stanfield, the beautiful teenage daughter of Frederick Clarkson Stanfield, a Buffalo man who was a well-known scenery artist in regional theaters. When the wedding took place, on December 1, 1874, Hughes was fifty-nine, his bride just seventeen. Newspapers covered the nup-

tials—THE FAKIR TAKES A WIFE WAS one typical headline—and described how the newlyweds left by train for a honeymoon in the East on the night of the wedding. Most impressive, the papers reported, were Hughes’s gifts to Sarah: fifteen thousand dollars in cash, and a set of diamond jewelry valued at five thousand dollars.

The union produced two sons and, it seems, a great deal of unhappiness. Isaiah experienced mood swings and periods of black depression. This was not entirely new; in Pittsburgh, during his performing days, the Fakir had once stormed into the city mayor’s office in a terrific fit of anger over six men who had tried to cheat him in some way, demanding justice for the “humbuggery” he had been subjected to. In one bit of possibly apocryphal family lore passed down in the Stanfield family, Sarah finally received permission from her father to leave Hughes after Isaiah tried to set their family home on fire. (This did not make the Buffalo newspapers, if it indeed happened.) Hughes and Sarah went their separate ways while the boys were still young, and, though they never divorced, they led widely divergent lives.

Hughes traveled on his own in Europe, tried to operate a theater in Troy, New York, then still later moved to Olean, in the rural Southern Tier of New York State, where he lived by himself on the dwindling money he had retained from his performing days.

Sarah Stanfield Hughes lived quietly in Buffalo the rest of her life. When she died, in 1934, ac-

cording to family stories preserved by her descendants, Sarah’s greatest sorrow had been that Isaiah Hughes was able to keep her two sons away from her after their separation. Frank Fakir and Harry Ava were sent to live out of town with relatives of Hughes’s, and Sarah no longer got to see them.

Her second-greatest sorrow? That she had been in love with Harry Kellar, at seventeen, and forced to marry the Fakir of Ava instead.

By the spring of 1890, the magician knew he was failing.

By then a resident of the tiny backwater of Olean, a railroad-stop village in upstate New York, Isaiah Hughes was in his early seventies but felt much older. Decades spent on the road, jolting across Western prairies in creaking wagons stuffed with the mechanisms of his stage show, or riding by train and riverboat to small cities in the Midwest and South with trunks full of props for his illusions, had taken a toll on Hughes’s strong body, if not his magnetizing mind.

In March of that year, Hughes called two of his oldest friends to his side to witness a last will and testament. The ailing performer, who had learned over the years never to enter any situation underprepared, wanted to be ready.

Just a few things were important to Hughes as he faced the end. He wanted his possessions—there were but two of any value remaining—to go to his young sons: a diamond pin in the shape of a cross for Frank

Fakir Hughes; a gold watch and chain for Harry Ava Hughes.

Hughes also made arrangements for a headstone in Buffalo's Forest Lawn Cemetery for his grave, which is located not far from the remains of ex-president Millard Fillmore and the Seneca chief Red Jacket. Perhaps thinking that no one would remember—or envisioning a day when everyone would—the magician ordered a tall, graceful monument that showed his given name, I.H.

Hughes, in much smaller letters than his old stage name. FAKIR OF AVA, reads the base of the obelisk, in four-inch-high block capitals.

Pneumonia claimed Hughes's life the following spring. Upon his death, in May 1891, the *New York Times* published a brief obituary under the headline THE 'FAKIR OF AVA' DEAD. The obituary stated that Hughes had been "in years past... a somewhat noted conjuror and magician." The newspaper noted, dismissively, that "he had

lived in Buffalo and was once reputed quite wealthy."

Hughes would have hated the vague equivalence more than the brevity. Even in death, he hedged his bets. Among his final requests, made in his last will, Hughes asked to be buried in a special coffin: one made out of metal. Nowhere did he indicate which he feared more: that which might get out, or that which might get in. As ever, he played his cards close to the vest. ★

MICROINTERVIEW WITH PETER GALISON, PART II

THE BELIEVER: *Einstein's Clocks, Poincaré's Maps* is an accessible book on the era that led to relativity theory. It offers a real sense that these physicists were embedded in the world they theorized about, that materiality and theory were of a piece.

PETER GALISON: Poincaré, the great French mathematician, physicist, and philosopher, said: Imagine two telegraphers who are sending signals back and forth to determine longitude. Einstein says: Imagine a train comes into the station at seven o'clock.

BLVR: And we usually treat the trains and telegraphers as purely imaginary references, right?

PG: That's how we've read their ruminations on telegraphs and tracks—as pure fictions. But a lot of what I wanted to do is to say: What are these guys *really* doing? What were Poincaré and Einstein actually *engaged in* back at the turn of the century? Were they really concocting just-so stories about telegraphers and trains? Or can one look into these metaphors and see them as being both literal—really involved with trains—and allusive at the same time? We forget that Poincaré was actually working with real and brave

souls who clambered up mountains and sailed across oceans to pull telegraph cables.

BLVR: Plus Einstein the patent clerk...

PG: Right; his patent office was responsible for evaluating clock coordination along rail lines. We think, after the fact, Oh, isn't it amazing that this patent clerk finished the theory of relativity with a metaphor of trains in thought experiments? We take Poincaré's ruminations on longitude-finding telegraphers to be philosophical just-so stories, like postwar analytic philosophy's endless imaginary stories about brains in a vat. But those physical, material, everyday elements were anything but incidental back in 1900. They were part of the world Einstein and Poincaré inhabited.

The thing is, we are always embedded in the world. I like the idea of a world that goes back and forth between being literal and allusive, and that's what I like about science. It seems constantly to be saying that these objects that are very prosaic are also our way of understanding the big questions: What is the self? How do we understand what the world is made of? Is democracy possible? ★

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The Believer (ISSN 1543-6101) is published monthly, except bi-monthly in March/April, July/August, and November/December, by McSweeney's Publishing LP 849 Valencia Street, San Francisco, CA 94110. Periodicals Postage Paid at San Francisco, CA and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Believer, 849 Valencia Street, San Francisco, CA 94110-1737. Printed in Canada by The Prolific Group. Subscriptions: believermag.com. Send letters to letters@believermag.com.