

Lives that Lift

C L Paddock 1935



The World's Greatest Inventor, Once a Newsboy

During his boyhood, there was only one person who had any faith to believe that Thomas Alva Edison would ever accomplish anything worthwhile in the world. He was a puny, weak, sickly child, and was dull in his lessons. He went to school at a primary school in Ohio, and although he worked hard at his lessons he made slow progress, usually being at the foot of the class. One day the teacher in her discouragement told "Al" that he was "addled," and that it was a shame for his parents to waste time and money in trying to give him an education.

Of course the boy was discouraged, and as most boys would do, he told his troubles to his mother. Having been a school teacher herself she took him out of school and taught him herself. She was an apt teacher and "Al" made wonderful progress. Perhaps one reason was that she had the patience to answer his questions, when possible. He was continually asking questions, trying to find the why and wherefore of this and that.

Years afterward, in writing of this experience he said, "My mother was the best champion that a boy ever had, and I determined right then that I would be worthy of her and show her that her confidence in me was not misplaced. She was so true, so sure of me; and I felt that I had some one to live for, some one that I must not disappoint. My mother was the making of me." Most boys could give the same testimony about their mothers, and girls also could tell the same story. Our mothers are our best friends.

When about eleven years old he became interested in chemistry, and the cellar in his home became his chemical laboratory. He collected more than a hundred bottles for his chemicals, and labeled each one of them "poison," so no one would meddle with them. Every minute he could spare was spent in the basement, and all the money he could earn was spent in the local drug store.

He was hindered in his experiments by lack of money, so he persuaded his parents to allow him to sell newspapers on the train that ran between Detroit and Port Huron. He was soon selling other articles such as candy, fruit, and nuts. This venture proved profitable to him and he now had all the money he needed for his laboratory work.

One day while his train was stopping at Mt. Clemens, at the risk of his own life he rescued the little son of Mr. J. MacKenzie, the station agent. The child was playing on the track. Edison, seeing the child in danger of being killed by a moving car, dropped his papers, and saved the child's life. The wheels of the car grazed Edison's heel as he jumped from the tracks with the child in his arms. Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie were so grateful to Edison they felt they must do something to show their appreciation for his brave deed. Knowing that Edison wanted to learn telegraphy, Mr. MacKenzie offered to teach him. It was the chance he had been waiting for and he eagerly accepted the kind offer.

He was now studying chemistry and telegraphy, and selling papers as well. He had to rearrange his schedule so as to make better use of his time, so he secured permission to use part of a car on the train as a laboratory. In this way he made use of many hours on the train which might otherwise have been wasted. One day a jostling of the car caused a stick of phosphorus to fall on the floor. It burst into flames and soon the car was on fire. A hot-tempered conductor happened to be on the run, and he boxed Edison's ears so soundly that from that day on the young man was deaf, and this deafness remained with him to old age.

He was not the kind of boy to be discouraged by sickness, dullness, or deafness. His mother still had faith in him and he plodded on.

He had mastered telegraphy sufficiently, at sixteen, to enable him to get a position as telegraph operator at Stratford Junction, Ontario. He still continued to ask questions, but he found most of the old operators knew little about telegraphy. His ingenuity is shown in an incident which happened while he was employed at Port Huron. One night there was a severe storm and the wires across the river were broken and communication stopped. He went into the yards, found a locomotive, and with the whistle he sent a message by the Morse code to the operator on the opposite side of the river, almost a mile away.

His mind was ever alert. When he was twenty-one he had invented an instrument for recording sales on the Stock Exchange and reporting them almost instantly in many distant points. When the Western Union asked him to name a price for the invention he told them he would like to go home and talk it over with his wife. Let him tell the story himself, "She said 'Tell them twenty thousand dollars.'

"'Twenty thousand dollars!' I exclaimed. 'I don't want to scare them to death.'

" 'Say it softly, and if he starts to run you can stop him,' she answered. 'Then you can say "Joking aside, what do you think it's worth?" '

"When I went to bed that night I lay a long time thinking of the matter. Twenty thousand dollars! It would pay my debts and build and equip a little laboratory. It would make me the happiest man in the world.

"The next day I went to the manager's office.

" 'Well, Edison, have you decided on the price for that invention?' he asked.

" 'Yes,' I said.

" 'What is it?'

"I tried to say twenty thousand dollars, but couldn't. The words stuck in my throat. I simply hadn't the nerve. That momentary hesitation was a lucky thing for me.

“ 'How about a hundred thousand dollars?' broke in the manager, while I was trying to brace myself to make a new start for the hurdle."

No wonder it was hard for him to make himself believe it was not a dream, for it was only a short time before that he had arrived in New York, penniless, yes, worse than that, for he was in debt. And he was deaf, and not very strong. For weeks he roamed the streets hungry and penniless, and now to think he was to get one hundred thousand dollars for his invention! He could hardly believe it was true.

Invention after invention was added to his list; in fact it would take pages to name them all. Probably one of the most important is our electric lights. And of course we all appreciate the phonograph which he gave to the world.

How could a boy with so many handicaps make such a success? He says the secret was "the ability to apply physical and mental energies to one problem incessantly without growing weary." Speaking of his deafness he said, "This deafness has been a great advantage to me in many ways. When in a telegraph office, I could hear only the instrument directly on the table at which I sat; and unlike the other operators, I was not bothered by the other instruments. Again, my nerves have been preserved to me intact. Broadway is as quiet to me as a country village is to a person with normal hearing."

He himself felt his greatest success was the invention which he felt would be the most blessing to his fellow men, the incandescent lamp, for he said, "Every night the President of the United States is sitting in his library at the White House, reading by my lamp. The great premiers of Europe are using it in the great capitals of their nations.

"Yet this does not interest me, but rather that this incandescent lamp is being used tonight in all the great hospitals of the world. Operations which otherwise could not be performed, and lives which otherwise would be lost, are being saved by this incandescent lamp. The homes of millions and millions of housewives all over the land are being made brighter, and their lives made easier by this incandescent lamp.

"But that is not all. It is not being enjoyed simply by the rich. The bums and the tramps who are walking the streets of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco, London, Berlin, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, the great cities of China, India, and Egypt, are also enjoying this incandescent lamp."

The world's greatest inventor began life with more handicaps than most of us have known. But he refused to be discouraged. He read good books, worked, and made use of his spare time. His life should be an inspiration to every boy and girl.