

"SOME CRANKS I HAVE MET"—THOMAS A. EDISON

A Chat with the Wizard of Menlo Park About the Impossible and Ridiculous Devices on Which He Is Invited to Pass Judgment.

"THIS is great weather for cranks; they incubate in the summer time, you know." The curtains were all pulled down in the long, high ceilinged library and electric fans purred in different parts of the room, but Thomas A. Edison pressed his hand to his brow and gave a little half sigh, half puff, as if extremely warm, when he made this remark. Then he pointed to a large wire mail basket in one corner of his desk. "Within the next two months," he said, "that will be almost full every morning of letters giving me ideas which will revolutionize the world. All the strange things that have occurred to strange humanity, in all parts of the country, during these incubating months I will hear about. I will be offered in each case the opportunity of a lifetime to win fame and fortune. All in the world I will have to do is to work out the idea. Easy, simple—according to my correspondents; a mere matter of a few hours. That's the harvest of this ideal hot weather I shall reap.

"I can't afford the time to let them in for a talk any more. I had to stop their visits some time ago. I found that they really took up fifty per cent of my time. But one in all the hundreds I have seen had anything that at all approached the practical. The rest were all alike, acted alike, looked alike.

"My crank was always cadaverous, he had long hair and invariably some eccentricity—dissymmetry of the central office as a rule.

"Throughout the year I average ten letters a month on perpetual motion alone, and in the last three years I have received five thousand letters from airship and aeroplane inventors trying to get me to work out their impossible ideas. In every case and on whatever idea the letter is always an elaborate one, a screed that has taken several hours of manual labor, at least, to produce. Instead of spending the time that way my crank might have gone to work with a jackknife and some glue and with half the effort demonstrated to his own satisfaction the impossibility of his scheme. He always seems to want to get something with a lead pencil. Invariably he wants somebody else to do the work for him.

"Oh, yes, I read all the letters. I read very fast. For instance, I can read a novel in two hours and then tell my wife more about it than she knows after she has read it all day. And, say, here's something occurs to me.

"The real egg of Columbus of education is learning to read properly. We really leave out the most important thing in a common school education. We teach children to read like this:—'On May the 5th the wagon was sent to Morristown, N. J.'"

Mr. Edison held a large catalogue before him in approved fourth reader fashion. Each word he slowly and painstakingly articulated. Then with a gesture of impatience he tossed the book to one side.

One Had a Good Idea.

"A single glance at a line would have been sufficient to inform the reader about what happened to the

shrug of his shoulders to accentuate, if possible, the extreme simplicity of the whole thing.

"They utilize water, air, oil, wood, stone, almost anything you can think of for bases. They solve the question by means of ball bearings; they apparently overcome all friction; they arrive at conclusions that allow a certain amount of friction; they get around a big obstacle in hundreds of adroit ways—on paper. Not one of them is any good. It is but a waste of time to listen to them or to read about them. But what am I going to do?"

"They come at me with all sorts of ideas for the utilization of power they claim to be able to get power for in ocean waves. One fellow sent me a special delivery letter wanting to make an appointment to show me how he could make a dynamo run a motor. After the motor was started he proposed running the dynamo with it and thus get power for



My Crank Was Always Cadaverous. He Had Long Hair and Invariably Some Eccentricity

tionary. It was my painful duty to inform this agent that since the earliest memory of man this same device had been in general use. It took a long while, however, for him to be convinced and give up his efforts and return to Bogota.

"That is what becomes of a good many of the cranks I have met. They go back to Bogota, figuratively. I suppose when they get there they set to work thinking up new ideas, laying plans for other invasions of real workers' time. Some of them, however, get to the ears of men with money, and, given the fact that their idea is so far practical that its model may be made to do a certain showy piece of work, eventually see the radio this or electro that

can't under any circumstances be worked out successfully.

Wall Street Easy.

"The easy marks in Wall street are their special prey. I can't include in that class a lot of the older heads of banking houses or brokerage firms, but you would be surprised at the number of men engaged in high finance there who barely escape it. It is generally the newcomer to whom they make a plea and who takes the chance with them of acquiring a fortune. This newcomer is the transient of Wall street. He has made a stake in some other part of the country and is here to play the big game with the big players. Very few of his sort ever win. And only one phase of the poetic justice of his 'cleaning' is the inventor crank.

"The farmers' friends make much capital out of my crank, especially if his invention is very radical. They manufacture one or two machines that will look good and that with some assistance will work a little, and they flood the country with literature advertising this great achievement, what it is going to mean to the world, what it is going to mean to those who get in on the ground floor, then giving simple but explicit directions for sending money through the mail. These people sail within a thirty-second of an inch of Sing Sing most of the time and some of them slip and get there.

"This sort of business will always be, more or less. Post Office authorities can minimize it, but they can't absolutely stop it. Every young man must have a certain amount of experience with things of this character. All the government can do is to see that he gets it in the least expensive way.

"It took me forty—no, thirty—no, twenty-five years to get my experience. I got into all kinds of trouble because I paid no attention to business.

"The only way I know of telling the good from the bad in the matter of inventions advertised for sale is to insist on thorough tests. These are in many cases easily simulated. Wonderful sources of power may be really hidden batteries and electrical connections. It is very often difficult, extremely difficult, to recognize an old element in a new dress. It is very readily taken for a new element.

"I have a friend who takes a little financial interest in every invention of a possible practical nature that is brought to his notice. He wins an

average of once in ten times. What he loses in the other nine times does not amount to his winnings, so I think his is a pretty good plan. Of course he is careful in looking out for himself in way of contracts and things like that, and then he wouldn't take a flyer on a perpetual motion solution. He gets as expert advice as possible on all occasions too.

"But the general public does not scatter its eggs like this friend of mine. A man who can half way prove his dream can get out gilt edged stock certificates and sell them by the hundreds. The backer of the crank's invention, if he be not a very clever promoter and versed in all the ways of putting the article on the market in the most attractive style, is certain to lose all his investment in very quick order. The mere fact that he is willing to take a chance at another man's game argues for his easiness in the eyes of the money hunting man with an idea.



wagon on May 5. The art of reading a whole line at once is easy to acquire. It should be taught in the public schools. Then children would read with pleasure and would teach themselves rapidly as they grow older. You might almost call me a crank on this subject. But I have more than an idea.

"As I say, I never saw but one crank who really had anything worth anything. He had a mechanical movement that was really wonderful. But I couldn't make any use of it. The rest of them had the kind of junk that lingers up the patent office. I think that I have been inflicted with every kind of perpetual motion scheme ever dreamed of. In the minds of the inventors there was never any doubt of the solution of the problem. A wheel here—Mr. Edison made a circle as his right arm would allow—and over there and there you are. Easy, isn't it? The inventor spread out his hands, gave a little

nothing. All sorts of magnetic engines, wireless inventions, or, better, ideas, and various new forms of chemical processes are eagerly brought to me to be worked out. There's nothing in any of them. One somewhat advertised attempt, that of using centrifugal force as a motive power for an airship, is laughable. Centrifugal force is a state. The inventor might just as well put a mince pie in his craft and expect to propel it as the wheel with which he says he can develop his wonderful force.

"But he is a confident chap, the crank. You can't say much or do much to shake him of the firm belief that he has accomplished something marvellous. A man called on me some time ago from Bogota. He was the representative of an inventor there who had equipped him with a five thousand dollar letter of credit and sent him up here to astonish people with a belt tightening device, which he believed was revolun-

or the magnetic something else, whatever they call it, company really in existence. If they happen to get hold of the real first class promoter, or farmers' friend, they will at least have a gaudy collection of literature and engraved stock certificates to paste in their scrapbook when the final blow-up comes. This has got to come, you know, because their inventions or ideas are not at all practical in the first place and

"The only real work being done is by the professional inventors of the country and by the engineers in charge of various projects. In fact, in the engineers' clubs in the great cities of the United States you may find all the men, outside of the chemical and electrical inventors, who are doing all the big work being done in this country. There's nothing in the world that can beat New England Yankees inventing small automatic machines. This genius is born in them. In a great many ways I consider them the most remarkable inventors in the world.

"I don't believe I've ever had many cranks come to me from that part of the country. They make me of good sound sense up there. The authors of the letters that I'm going to begin to get as soon as this incubating season is over I can't say as much of. I think they have exaggerated kinks in some of the folds of their brains. I am just as sure as anything that I'm going to get the same old windmill storage power idea that I have received every fall as long as I can remember."

"From what part of the country do the most cranks come?" I asked, as the inventor motioned for the boy to turn on an extra electric fan.

"Kansas," he replied. "They seem to flourish with the grasshoppers."

MONEY TALKS.

ARE you depositing confidence in the hearts of your fellow men?

Are you straining your credit of patience with your friends?

Do you pay the world a reasonable rental for the space you occupy?

Are you providing a sinking fund of kindness to liquidate offences against your brother men?

Are you strengthening the tie that binds yourself to your loved ones?

Do your actions create a feeling of confidence and optimism?

Can you draw upon the credence of your friends without precipitating a panic of distrust?

Have you any good deeds out at compound interest?

Does your check of honor ever come back marked "No funds?"

Are you building up a reserve fund of health for the red blood stringency of old age?

Do your friends "bank" on you?

Is your word as good as your bond—your company?