

"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 50 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 10 letters a month on perpetual motion alone, and in the last three years I have received 5,000 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 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

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 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.



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

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 blowup comes. This has got to come, you know, because their inventions or ideas are not at all practical in the first place and 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. Postoffice 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 40—no, 30—no, 25 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.

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 men 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."

A Question of Ownership

"I WANT to put a hypothetical question to you," said the pretty girl, after the man had picked out the most comfortable chair in the room and had seated himself therein. "It is as long and as complicated as some of the questions propounded by lawyers in criminal trials, but I think you will be able to follow its intricacies.

"Suppose you were a woman—me, for example—and suppose two other women visited you the same evening. They were strangers to each other and came and went separately. Suppose that after they had gone you noticed an umbrella which had been left, presumably by one of your callers. Suppose the next morning Miss A telephoned you and asked if she had left her umbrella at your house; that she had left it some place, she couldn't just remember where, but she believed it was at your house. Was it? You said it was, and Miss A said she would send a boy right around to get it; she had just learned that she would have to leave the city for quite a while and would you kindly give the boy the umbrella?

"Suppose the boy came and you gave him the umbrella, and then a little later Miss B came rushing in and asked for her umbrella, which she had left at your house the night before—her umbrella, mind you! the very one you had just sent to Miss A, but which Miss B swore she could positively prove to be hers, you'd be in something of a pickle by that time, wouldn't you?

"Well, suppose that to clear the matter up you rushed around to Miss A's, hoping to recover the umbrella, but found that both she and the umbrella had already gone. Then you rushed around home again, to find Miss B pacing up and down your room

wondering what on earth she should ever do, because it was beginning to rain cats and dogs and she had dozens of places to go to that day and would certainly get soaked to the skin and maybe catch her death of cold because she had no umbrella; because you—you, the careless monster—had given hers away to somebody who hadn't the shadow of a right to it; you'd feel pretty desperate by that time, wouldn't you?

"Well, suppose that to relieve the situation still further you offered to replace Miss B's umbrella. The substitution wasn't your own umbrella, but one that another friend had left at your house a short while before, a most excellent umbrella, best of silk and a beautiful handle; much better, no doubt, than the one Miss B had lost. Would that be fair? Would you have a moral right to square yourself with one person by giving her the umbrella that had been left at your house by somebody else?"

"Right!" exclaimed the young man. "Very certainly. An umbrella is common property. The courts have decided that. If a man leaves an umbrella anywhere he has no right to expect ever to see it again."

"Oh, I am so glad," murmured the pretty girl. "But what is the end of all this hypothetical inquisition?" asked the man. "What is it leading up to?"

"Oh, nothing," said the girl. "Let's talk about something else."

They did talk about something else for three hours. When the man started home he said: "Oh, by the way, where's my umbrella? I left it here the other night, didn't I?"

"You did," said the girl sweetly. "It was your umbrella that I took to square myself with Miss B."



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 afflicted 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 that problem. A wheel here—Mr. Edison made as large a circle as his right arm would allow—and a little hub over there and there you are. Easy, isn't it? The inventor spread out his hands, gave a little 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

"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 marvelous. A man called on me some time ago from Bogota. He was the representative of an inventor there who had equipped him with a \$5,000 letter of credit and sent him up here to astonish people with a belt tightening device, which he believed was revolutionary. 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 or

