

**Thomas Edison's Last Invention**  
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**First 5 pages; email me to request the full .pdf**  
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Thomas Edison's film clip concludes with his narration. "My phonograph and movie camera capture your voice and image and record them for future viewers. It may be possible to invent a device so sensitive that those on the other side can send warnings to us."

The lights come up in the newsroom as the end piece of the film flaps around and around the reel. My fellow reporters stir, stretch, and light up smokes.

One of them asks me, "What do you think, Jake?"

"A premonition transmitter?" I answer.

My news producer, whose large frame generated his nickname, The Bull, lights his cigar as he walks to the front of our gathering.

"Okay gentlemen, Edison turns 84 this month. I hear he's been ill lately. Rumors of dementia circulate." The Bull takes another puff. "I've been told his wife thinks his inventions entice sinful lifestyles. She won't allow him to wire their house with his electrical lights. They use gas lamps except for Edison's cellar workshop."

"My sources confirm he gabs with ghosts," pipes in one of the old-timers.

"What sources?" I question. "Gossip isn't news." As the youngest news hound on The Bull's team, just out of college with a degree in journalism, I need to get my voice in there and challenge these ink-stained news hawkers.

"Thanks, Jake." The Bull blows smoke rings. He swats one. "At any rate, before the "Father of the Future" passes on, let's find out what thoughts he has on the fate of man, his hopes for humanity, and his reflections on the past. Anybody got any other questions to ask of him? If

we can get an interview?”

“How has the economic downturn,” one reporter says, “altered his belief in the power of man’s inventions to overcome problems?”

“Is he religious?” another reporter says. “What role does he see for religion in the scientific world of the future?”

“Yeah. Does Edison view the current state of the world as God’s way of punishing man? Retribution for believing man’s inventions—not God—can save humankind from its problems?”

“I’m interested in this psychic research angle,” I say. “I’ve always believed as Edison does. Man’s inventions are the key to saving the world. He never seems to have concern for the future.”

“Jake.” The Bull turns toward me. “Your steadfast support of Edison and your interest in psychic research persuades me to give you first shot at this assignment. He’s scheduled to speak at a lighting convention. Try to get a personal interview before then.

He adjourns the meeting.

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I dated a girl whose mother attends the same church as Mrs. Edison and was able to obtain a referral. I approach the Edison house for my interview, and after knocking quite loudly for a time, Mrs. Edison opens the door. She invites me in, and I ask about Thomas. She walks over to the closed door leading down to his workshop and raps on it with the curved portion of a heavily ornamented walking cane.

She calls out to him in a shrill and nagging voice. “Thomas, Thomas.”

The old man reacts in the conditioned response of husbands who have long ago given up the battle with a domineering wife. “Yes, dear?” I hear him call out from down in the cellar.

Though she hears him respond, the big-boned, strong-featured, woman gives a few more raps with her cane. “Thomas, Thomas. There’s a newsman here. Get up here, right now, or I’ll send him away.”

Thomas calls out, “Coming dear.”

Mrs. Edison, walking with her cane, leads me back to the parlor and we sit while waiting for Thomas. “I’m not happy about this, young man. If Sarah, from my prayer group, hadn’t recommended you, I’d never let a newsperson in my house. The things they write about Thomas.”

I stir uncomfortably in the chair and am relieved to see Thomas entering the room. Mrs. Edison controls the situation. “Thomas, this young man, Jake, comes recommended by Sarah. He’s from Movietone News.”

I rise and shake Thomas’s hand as he crosses over to a chair.

She continues to dominate the introduction. “Now, Jake will take notes on your speech tonight at the lighting convention. Remember, no answers to any questions about those silly rumors. Your inventions alone have caused enough evil in this world. The things those decadent people do in the record and movie business, disgusting!”

Thomas and I nod to each other.

“Now, get dressed: no, you wait here while I pick out the clothes you’ll wear.” She stands up with much labor. “You two get acquainted. Jake promised to write a nice story about you that will make me proud.” She walks out, leaning heavily on her cane.

“Mr. Edison what of the psychic research rumors?” I ask.

“All my inventions move man forward into the future.”

Not the answer I was looking for, so I try again, “But, have you invented a psychic device

allowing you to talk with the dead?”

He hesitates, then, says in a voice low enough to assure that Mrs. Edison cannot hear him, “I have invented an apparatus so sensitive it allows a psychic power to communicate with me.”

Shocked, I ask, “How?”

“It absorbs my consciousness, something like the reverse of a movie projector.” He tries to simplify, “Instead of pictures projected onto a screen for me to see, my consciousness enters into a funnel of images and sounds.”

“What’s the message?”

His face darkens. “Something, or someone, sent me a warning ... sent humanity a warning of an evil force gathering strength, and will soon engage the whole world in a monstrous, murderous, struggle.”

“But, who?”

Mrs. Edison’s cane raps on the railing as she calls down to Thomas. “Thomas, come up here right now, I’ve picked out the clothes for you to wear tonight.”

“Yes, dear.” He obediently starts to get up.

“Can I see this invention, sir?” I say as we rise.

“Yes, after the speech tonight. You can ride back here with us, and I will let you participate. Perhaps you can better interpret the images than I ... old, and slow, you know.” He winks at me as he leaves to get dressed. I scribble notes.

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At the conference, I sit in the front row with the other correspondents from various news outlets, but I am the only Movietone News Reporter. During Edison’s speech to the conventioners, I keep my eye on his overbearing wife, as best I can. She sits in the crowd

behind me, monitoring its responses.

The audience shows interest in his views on AC versus DC electricity and his competitive remarks about Tesla. The crowd's focus on him pleases her. One old man, though, snoozes off, and Mrs. Edison taps him with her cane and snarls.

At the end of the speech, Thomas receives a standing ovation, and the journalists begin questioning him.

“What role do you see for religion in our modern scientific world?” asks the first reporter.

I flinch, knowing Mrs. Edison must be shooting threatening looks in her husband's direction. He glances at her, then turns away.

“None,” Thomas says.

The crowd murmurs and makes notes. Mrs. Edison's cane taps the floor, in rhythm with the beating of my heart.

Another reporter known to cover religious issues, asks, “Do you believe man has an immortal soul?”

I cringe, not daring to face Mrs. Edison. The tapping gets louder.

“An immortal intelligence,” Thomas answers.

In the few moments of verbal silence, while the audience absorbs what he just said, the tapping of the cane increases in speed and volume. Then everyone starts talking at once.

I look back and see Mrs. Edison roll her eyes and shake her head. The glare she gives me could melt iron. She awaits my question. I take a deep breath.

“Many of your inventions,” I say, “the phonograph, the movie projector, in essence, immortalize personalities. Do you put any stock in psychic research or mechanisms that claim to communicate with the dead?”

I feel Mrs. Edison's eyes burning a hole in the back of my head. The tapping stops. Her weight must be shifting to the cane.

"Yes," Thomas nods at me. "I do."

I glance back. Mrs. Edison rises, stomps her cane and screams her husband's name.

"Sir," I shout over the clamor, "have you attempted to invent such a gadget?"

"All my inventions have resulted from my attempts to create the device. I can now report, I have succeeded."