

THOMAS EDISON

A play by
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Setting: Thomas Edison's research laboratory

Characters:

Narrator

Thomas Edison

Charlie, the assistant

Narrator: Thomas Edison was one of the most famous inventors and had more than 1,000 inventions to his name. His favorite invention was the phonograph.

Edison: Charlie, last night I had a strange dream.

Assistant: What was it about, sir?

Edison: Well, it was really peculiar. I was in my laboratory working on improving the voice quality of the telephone when a strange idea popped into my mind. I thought if I could send my voice through a wire to a great distance as I do with the telephone, then why couldn't I send my voice onto some kind of material that would register it so that it could be saved and played back?

Charlie: That sounds like a great idea, sir, but how would you do it?

Edison: This is going to take a lot of figuring! There's got to be something that can carry the sound... maybe something like a nail or a pin... something pointed to cut through or scratch the surface of a special kind of material.

Charlie: A pin sounds like it might work. How about scratching a plate of glass? Or perhaps a sheet of steel?

Edison: I think we need the special material to be lighter. Let us think and work on it.

Narrator: Thomas Edison and Charlie gathered all sorts of materials and tested and tested the idea. Nothing seemed to work until one morning Thomas showed Charlie what he had been working on all night long.

Edison: Charlie, come over here. Quick! Look at this!

Charlie: What is it?

Edison: It's an old cylinder I found in the garage that I tightly wrapped with tinfoil.* Then I looked for some needles in my dear wife, Mina's sewing box. I worked with this for several hours until I could hear little sounds.

Charlie: Why are there two needles, Mr. Edison?

Edison: Charlie, one is for recording and one is for the playback.

Narrator: Charlie marveled as Thomas Edison spoke into the mouthpiece he held in his hand. His voice made sound vibrations which were sent to the needle. Charlie saw the cylinder slowly move in a circle while the needle indented the tinfoil. Those indentations carried Mr. Edison's voice vibrations.

Charlie: What did you say, Mr. Edison?

Edison: Well, let's play the words back and see if this really works!

Narrator: Both men stood in amazement as they heard the first words ever recorded on a phonograph. What were those words? They were, "Mary had a little lamb."

Charlie: "Mary had a little lamb!" Is that truly what you said, Mr. Edison?

Edison: Yes, Charlie! I believe we've got another winning invention!

Narrator: In the year, 1878, Mr. Edison started the Edison Speaking Phonograph Company. Not only would this machine be used to record voices, Mr. Edison had many ideas of how to use it.

Edison: Charlie, I think the phonograph can be put to lots of different uses. Help me think of some.

Charlie: Well, I know I'd love to record my wife and children so that I'd always have the sound of their voices.

Edison: Perhaps a famous actor could record the reading of a book from cover to cover so that a blind person would be entertained.

Charlie: Speaking of entertainment, singers could record their songs - even orchestras could record their music. Oh, Mr. Edison, we could spend all night thinking of many more uses for the recording of sound. Mr. Edison, I think you are a genius!

Edison: Why, thank you, Charlie. Now let's get back to work!

* Tin foil is a thin sheet of tin and is slightly stiffer than aluminum foil.

The website www.tinfoil.com/harpers.htm shows pictures of Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph.