

The Secret Life of Francis Upton

The light bulb flickered to life. With it, a gasp, and a rather unmanly squeal of happiness, a certain middle-aged man shed a new light upon the world.

No pun intended.

“FRANCIS! My God, Francis, I’ve done it!” Thomas Edison ran, shouting with joy, from room to room in his own house in Ohio. He did not slow for even a moment as he searched for his friend, wanting Francis Upton to be the very first to hear the news. “It’s *magnificent*, Francis! I’ve honestly never seen *anything* like it!” Thomas shook with glee. His long, lanky strides swiftly changed into the steps of a wonderful dance, and his smile stretched from ear to ear. It was a joy of uncontrollable measures, and Francis Upton appeared at the top of the staircase in the house with a similar grin pasted on her features.

Yes. *Her* features. Not *his* features.

Well, what did you expect? This is the story of the secret life of Francis Upton, as I knew her. Not as history tells us or as Edison himself has told the world so many times over. Here is a bit of worldly advice for you: one of the many things I have learned in this life is that people, in general, lie. People lie for their own benefit. It is one of the many side effects of sin in this world, ladies and gentlemen, and it has robbed my friend of her life’s work many times over.

I intend to remedy this situation.

“Thomas? What is all of this *racket* about?” A teasing smile played on the lips of the young woman gazing down upon our young inventor in earnest. Thomas simply grinned and straightened his shoulders. “Oh, obviously nothing important. *I*, my dear, have simply revolutionized the world, as we now know it. Nothing will ever be quite the same again.” Francis progressed down the stairs, walking excitedly towards the open arms of the exuberant man dancing below her. Once she reached his level, she had to look up at him in order to meet his eyes.

Thomas Edison, as we all know, was a lovely height.

Edison grinned down at her and lifted her up into the air. She laughed with him as he twirled the both of them around and around, and then cried tears of joy with him as he explained just how he had done it. Just how he, completely and utterly by himself, had created a work of genius. “Francis,” he said with amazement, “young people generations from now will know my name. *My name!* They’ll know it! And all because I discovered how to make light with a handful of platinum.”

Francis was duly excited, or at least appeared to be. She told me once that she had never been sure whether any genuine happiness had ever actually been present. At the time, she had felt so conflicted. She loved Thomas, but he, quite frankly, didn’t possess the scientific skill that was needed to create anything even remotely like this.

That was when she had stepped in.

Working late at night in what Thomas had referred to as his “lab”, Francis had made minute adjustments to her friend’s project. These adjustments were so small, so delicate, that Thomas had never expected a thing. She had even influenced his work by suggesting different methods quietly into his ear as he worked. It had taken time, but Thomas had always come around to her thoughts.

So, technically, Francis could claim this invention as her own.

Her own, *magnificent* creation, as Thomas had said it was.

In actuality, Francis considered this late that night when Thomas was out of the house. He was celebrating with friends, and this had provided an avenue for thought.

But she knew, just as I know and as you know, that it was better this way. Whom could she possibly hope to fool? No evidence could present itself to back up her story, and the fact that she was female only sent the matter further downhill.

No one, and I mean *no one*, would have bought that thing had it become known that it was borne out of the brain of a woman. Women were to run the household, to have children, and to feed their husbands. Yes, they were essential to life, but they were most definitely *non-essential* to key decisions concerning everything and everyone outside of the home.

That, in and of itself, would have been scandalous.

And so, Francis kept her mouth shut. Thomas Edison smiled fondly at what could have very well been a completely fake smile on her part, neither comprehending the mental turmoil that Francis Upton was suffering nor caring a lick. His mind was all profits and trade, and *my* what a great invention he had invented, was it not?

Forgive me the redundancy of that statement. I am simply recounting the instance, not accounting for the literary and grammatical status of Thomas Edison the Great Inventor.

As it were, life rolled on. Thomas presented his brilliant creation, took every ounce of credit for himself (which Francis resented bitterly, but honestly could find no one to blame aside from herself, as she had not bothered to tell Thomas of her part in the project), and literally revolutionized the way mankind functions as one huge, dysfunctional society.

Care for me to shed some more light on the subject of Francis Upton?

(I am terribly sorry. I shall try to monitor my tragically horrendous puns more carefully as the story continues.)

Francis Upton lived a painful life. Oh yes, she lived comfortably in the physical sense, and as to the events of her life, nothing terribly drastic ever seemed to happen. She lived a perfectly neutral life, according to the casual observer. Unfortunately, as the both of us (I am now referring to you and I, of course) now know all too well, not everything was as it seemed. Edison changed the way that the average person lived, and Francis stood quietly behind him with every speech he ever presented. And when he moved on to other things, Francis stood behind him then as well. She backed every project that Edison started to the best of her ability – even when she was no longer with him.

Thomas Edison had never married Francis Upton, you see. He kept her as nothing beyond a mistress, and he accounted this to her brilliance. The man was attracted to that sort of brainpower. Once he discovered what she had been doing – and oh, yes, he did discover it – Thomas decided to get married. Francis was doing everything for him, and he couldn't afford this sort of failure on his part.

“Francis,” he said to her one day, out of the blue, “I need you to leave, darling.” Upton, shell-shocked, simply looked at him. Without uttering a word, she packed her things and left. Even so, the world somehow discovered her name. “Francis Upton,” some began to say. “Who is he?” their friends would ask, and they would reply, “Some sort of scientist who used to work for Edison, apparently. He fired him or something terribly boring like that.”

So it was that Thomas betrayed her. He insinuated that she was male, ruined her reputation and then left it in the muck and dirt, waiting for her.

Francis wandered about, settling in one place for a while and then leaving again to explore some new field of science. No one believed her story, no matter where she went. “Francis Upton? Edison's rogue assistant? You're crazy, woman,” they would tell her when she introduced herself to possible employers. “And besides,” they would often continue, “we don't hire *women*.” Just about no one did.

In a last attempt at a life that could mean something to the general public, Francis reached out to none other than Thomas Edison. Finding his new residence and standing up straight with artificial confidence, Francis knocked on her former friend's front door. Edison opened the door and stood there for a moment, stupefied. “No,” he said. “Whatever you want from me, no.” In a final act of desperation, Francis grabbed his arm as he attempted to close the door in her face. “Do you realize,” she said, her voice dripping with contempt and tears actually, quite literally, dripping from her eyes, “just how much money I've earned for you?” Thomas gritted his teeth and looked away from her. He couldn't even look directly at her. “I. Loved. You. You need to face that fact, Thomas. I loved you, and that is why I invented for you. I fixed your every mistake, and I never told you because I thought you needed to know that you were smart enough to do it on your own.” She paused, and Thomas glanced down at her. “Upton, listen to me, I-” “No, *you* listen to *me*,” she said with newfound authority. Thomas clamped his mouth shut in shock.

Women *never* spoke to men like that.

“You *owe* me. Do you realize just how many people are using your light bulb and I am not receiving *one ounce* of credit for it? I can't get a job, for obvious reasons, and because of that I can't afford to stay *anywhere*. You want me to listen to you? Give me work first, and then maybe I'll listen to your pathetic little speech.” Francis glared up at the renowned inventor. Thomas took a deep breath and began to speak. “No, Francis. I can't give you work. I know you helped me, once, but I have a family now. I have a wife and children, and life is perfect for me right now. I'm not exactly compelled to change anything.” He paused, then continued with a sympathetic smile growing on his face as his eyebrows also knit into a mask of pity. “I can't change anything for *one little inventor*.”

The door shut in her face.

Francis inhaled sharply, then walked swiftly away. “Well, now I’m ruined,” she said with defeat etched into every syllable she spoke. She regretted ever doing anything kind for that man. If she could have foreseen just how selfish and greedy Thomas Edison would become, she never would have helped him at all. But, of course, it couldn’t be helped. She would simply have to start her own lab elsewhere.

And that is precisely what she did.

Francis Upton bought an abandoned warehouse with the little bit of money she had left from her father’s inheritance and started her own makeshift lab. There, she created such things as the phonograph and motion picture camera, but kept them for herself. She couldn’t release them to the public, but she also couldn’t simply *stop* inventing, so her creations piled in her warehouse until she finally was forced to quit for lack of space. Suddenly, just as she was beginning to fall into a miserable depression, her inventions began to disappear. As if by magic, they reappeared in other places instead. Would you like to know exactly *where* they disappeared to?

Every single one of them appeared wherever Thomas Edison displayed them.

Her phonograph was presented at a science fair, and her motion picture camera appeared at a circus. They were spoken of in the newspapers and by word of mouth. “Edison’s next great invention,” humanity said with each and every new creation that popped up, and Francis wept in her own little corner of the world, despairing at her life.

“Thomas Edison!” She would scream as she sat on a forlorn chair in her bedroom, “You *thief!* You will pay for your actions!” But, of course, she knew that he wouldn’t. Everyone loved the bright inventor, the one who never ceased to create something to change a life.

Well, almost everyone. Francis, quite clearly, did not.

Now we come to me. Yes, me.

I am not just anyone. Once Francis realized that her voice would never be heard, never be known, she took certain precautions to maintain her dignity. “Someone, someday, will come across all of my lasting work,” she used to say to me as she adjusted a loose spring or a rusted bolt, “and they will know the truth. They *will.*”

This is my mission. This is my life. This is my purpose. I have nothing else to claim, except that the voice of Francis Upton *will* be heard, just as she told me that you *will* know the truth. I am just the vessel. I have no other story to tell, only the one I have carried for so long and told to so many strangers. I have created a legend out of your name, Francis, and, although I know not whether anyone will treat it as the truth, I know that your name *will* be remembered.

My memory systems will soon compromise, my body will rust and fall apart, and I will become a useless heap of junk, but this has not been in vain. I am a machine, a complex work of art that was painted by a master, and not all art lasts. Some types of art are useful, and, thankfully, I am that type of art. I have accomplished something, and now this piece of metal can fall away and become nothing but a mystery.

I am the Secret Life of Francis Upton, and I will be remembered.