

Alfred Nobel

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Chapter 1

Early Years

The place was a back room on the second floor of a shabby apartment building in Stockholm, Sweden. The time was October 21, 1833. The event was the birth of Alfred Bernhard Nobel.

The baby was so small, so weak, it could barely cry. His mother, Caroline, wept as she held the tiny infant in her arms. Somehow, she vowed, she would nurse him to health. She knew the rest of the family had given up hope. Not Caroline!

For eight years Caroline Nobel kept careful watch over her frail third son. It was never easy. The baby had a weak spine so it was years before he could sit up alone. He often had an upset stomach. Now and then it was hard for

him to breathe. But his mother never gave up. And by the time Alfred was eight, although he was never strong, she no longer had to lie awake nights worrying.

Later in his life, Alfred often wondered how his mother had gone on day after day. The family was poor. Alfred's father was a brilliant man. But, as is so often the case, he was not a good businessman. The rooms the family lived in were swept by icy winter drafts. A single stove gave out a bit of heat but never enough. Light came from smoky oil lamps that made Alfred and his brothers cough and wipe runny eyes and noses. Food was scarce. Dried codfish was served at every meal and not much else. Garbage was tossed into a corner of the back yard. It drew packs of bold, hungry rats.

In these years, Stockholm had thousands and thousands of pitifully poor people. Epidemics swept through the city. Almost every family lost at least one child to whooping cough or measles or other disease.

Many men were out of work. Among these

was Alfred's father. Immanuel Nobel spent his days puttering with inventions. They either did not work or did not sell. His mother, on the other hand, rose before dawn. She cleaned, she patched, she cooked the skimpy meals. Somehow she held the family together. Sometimes Alfred's brothers sold matches on a Stockholm street corner to help their mother.

Out of all this misery, Alfred had one happy memory. It was Christmas Eve. Caroline managed to see that her boys did not miss the jolly Swedish customs. They gulped *dipp i grytan* (bread dipped in a special broth). They danced around the small Christmas tree. They sang "Silent Night." Alfred never forgot these childhood Christmases. They were spots of beauty and color in a bleak childhood.

When Alfred was four, his father left the family behind in Sweden. He went to Russia to seek work. Caroline had no idea how she would support herself and her sons. It did not take her long to come up with a plan.

She borrowed money from family and

friends. Then she opened a small store. In it she sold milk, butter, cheese, and a few vegetables. The poor woman worked from dawn to late at night. But in time the store began to show a small profit. Now she could think about sending her sons to school.

Eldest son Robert was the first to be enrolled in the Jacob Parish School. Next came Ludwig. Then, when he was seven, it was Alfred's turn. Jacob Parish was a school for poor children. It was a gloomy, cruel place. Boys were beaten every day. Six spelling mistakes was a crime. The poor student was commanded to come to the teacher's desk at the front of the room. Ten trembling fingers were placed on its edge. Smash! Down came six painful lashes!

Alfred was luckier than most boys. First of all, his mother had already taught him to read and spell. Next, he had his father's brilliant mind. Last, he was willing to work hard. He quickly became a model student. His grades were high. No beatings for Alfred!

In the meantime, Immanuel was doing quite well in Russia. He had found a job at last. He built sea and land mines for the army. In 1842, when Alfred was nine, Immanuel had saved enough money to send for his family. Passports were given for “Mrs. Nobel and children, all minors.”

It was a shabby group that left Sweden in their mended clothes. Caroline was nearing 30. She was still a handsome woman with clear blue eyes and masses of dark gold hair. Her sons adored her. But she was tired. The years without her husband had been hard. Her sons had come to her with all their problems.

By the time they were ready to leave, Caroline had taught the three boys a few Russian words. Alfred soon taught himself other words that he would need in the new country. After only a year in Russia, he could speak its language easily and well.

The family traveled first by ship and then by coach. The roads were rough. The trip in the overcrowded damp coach seemed to take

forever. But Immanuel was waiting for them with a horse and a carriage and his own coachman. How surprised Caroline and the boys must have been to see Immanuel in fine clothes!

They soon learned that his inventions had been a success in this new country. He had strong contacts with the army and with the government. He was a changed man!

The Nobel's new home was a simple one-story wooden house on a canal. But it was far better than their apartment in Stockholm. Even so, poor Alfred suffered as much from cold and drafty rooms in St. Petersburg as he ever had in Sweden. But the Nobel family's way of life was much more comfortable. During this easy period, three more Nobel children were born. Only one son, Emil, survived. Alfred was to say later that Russia became almost a second homeland to the Nobel family.

Chapter 2

The Father and Three Sons

All three of the Nobel sons were sent to a school in St. Petersburg. Alfred did not last long. His spine was simply too weak to allow him to sit at a desk all day. By this time Immanuel Nobel was well known and growing rich. He was able to hire fine tutors for his sons. Alfred had a favorite tutor, Ivan Peterov. With this skilled man's help, Alfred quickly reached and passed his older brothers in all subjects. When he met with Peterov each morning, Alfred never knew what topic the lesson might cover – politics, history, science. It was not a formal education. Yet it could not have been a better one.

Alfred's nimble brain excelled at almost

any subject. He was amazingly gifted in foreign languages. As he grew older, he mastered Swedish, Russian, French, English, and German. He often wrote poetry in one or more of these languages. His father did not approve of his son becoming what Immanuel called a “pen man.” He did all he could to discourage Alfred’s writing.

When Alfred turned 16, his father offered him a chance to travel in other countries. There was only one catch. No more poetry writing! In fact, no writing of any kind. Alfred thought it over. Then he gave in. But he paid a price. He had a deep unfilled longing to write for the rest of his life. And he never stopped reading English poetry.

Alfred traveled first to Central Europe and then to England. Although very young, he was already a trained chemist. On this trip, he met with many of his father’s business connections. They were deeply impressed with this sharp young chemist. They let him carry on his work in their labs.

One day, Alfred sailed for the United States. He was eager to meet John Ericsson, a fellow Swede. Ericsson was working on a number of inventions. The warm air engine he was working on interested Immanuel Nobel so he sent his son to find out about it. Alfred's letters home at this time are unclear. They seem to show that John and Alfred never became close friends although they did have great respect for one another's work.

It became time for Alfred to return to Russia and go to work for his father. He had picked up a lot of new ideas on his travels. He wanted to see which of them might have value in one or more of his father's many activities.

It may be that he drove himself too hard. His father's factories now employed more than a thousand men. The Crimean War was in full force. Workers put in extra hours and days. Alfred often stayed at his post in the lab all night. By the following summer he was weak and ill. The doctors felt the cause was overwork. Alfred was sent to a health spa. He

called it the “bath and guzzle cure.” After a few months he seemed well enough to leave the spa. He made a few stops at labs on the way home. But he was eager to get back to work.

Life and work for the Nobels were good as long as the Crimean War lasted. Then orders to their factories stopped. Profits also sank because the Russians did not pay their bills.

Immanuel tried to keep the factories going. He sent Alfred to borrow money from banks in Paris and London. They turned him down. The time had come for a change. The father and his three sons had a long meeting. It was decided that Immanuel would take his wife and youngest son, Emil, back to Stockholm. Robert, Ludwig, and Alfred would stay in Russia.

The three sons worked hard to save a small sum of money so that their father might start all over again in Sweden. It was difficult, but somehow they did it.

Ludwig married and got his own place. Robert and Alfred shared an apartment. Alfred soon turned the small kitchen into a lab. He

began to get patents on inventions of his own. None of these early products with patents seem to have had lasting value. The brothers kept casting around for new ideas.

Then they heard of the work of a man named Sobrero. This man had discovered a new substance. He called it nitro-glycerin. Such a strange liquid! Such a *dangerous* liquid! It was heavy and oily and clear as water. When it blew up, as it often did, the gases it formed took up 10,000 times as much space as the liquid itself. There had to be a use for this powerful substance. But what could it be? The main problem was how to control it. Only then could it be used as an explosive. And, as usual, the world was trying for new ways to blow itself up!

Alfred and his brothers tried to solve the nitro-glycerin puzzle at their workshop in Russia. Immanuel tried to solve the puzzle at his workshop in Stockholm. The two groups did not always agree on the best method to do this. And that is where matters stood until the Heleneborg disaster!