

# WITHOUT EYES, HE LOOKS AFTER EVERY DETAIL OF A BIG BUSINESS

The Remarkable Life Story of an Oakland Merchant who has won success though **BLIND**

By Agnes Foster Buchanan.

**M**ANY men and women afflicted with blindness have had that affliction mitigated and softened by the invention and practical appliance of mechanical devices. For years, ever since the first crude effort was made to enable these helpless ones to read, busy minds have been at work, giving their full powers to the service of the less fortunate part of humanity around them. This scientific and persistent endeavor has reaped a rich harvest, the fullness of which has not even yet been reached. But the laborers in the field have already had the satisfaction of seeing other men and women, who, from accident or other misfortunes, have been shut out from the sunlight and other beautiful things of life, reading and writing, playing musical instruments and using tools, no longer a burden to themselves or to those connected with them.

Helen Keller has stood for some time in the public eye as the highest type of development in an individual handicapped by unseeing eyes. In her case so much has been written and so much more has been said that people generally have come now to regard her blindness as a mere external, hardly to be considered in the light of an affliction. Miss Keller, of course, reads and writes fluently. The intricacies of the typewriter have long since been mastered by her. She enjoys the diversions of several musical instruments and is an accomplished linguist. To her and to thousands of other "soul darkness" is a thing of the past.

The first departure made in the effort to raise the curtain of eternal darkness was to put the world's literature at the fingers' tips of those who dealt in darkness, for it was through the ends of the fingers that light, if light there was to be, must come. Books and sets of volumes in embossed lettering are now printed by the thousand, and the blind man or woman who cannot read today is regarded with but little more tolerance than their equally illiterate brothers or sisters who double their negatives and insist upon coupling singular verbs with plural substantives. From music of course the sightless eye cannot divorce any one. The insight and power that are required to bring great harmonies from string and key do not depend upon an optic nerve. Typewriting has opened an avenue of rapid writing to the blind as well as to those to whom the opening of a flower means something or the combination of colors put together by a master's hand speaks a message.

Many and varied have been the departures and lines followed by the blind, where it has been necessary for the individual to make a living. But did you ever hear or know of a man, for twenty years shut up within himself, organizing and ably conducting a large grocery?

There is such a man in Oakland. His name is W. B. Thomas. The unpretentious two-story building where he conducts his business gives no indication of the work going on inside. The W. B. Thomas Company sign above the door may mean everything or it may mean nothing. It may be merely the name of the corporation or W. B. Thomas may be the presiding genius himself. And so he turns out to be. Mr. Thomas is a man who makes his personality felt the moment he gives you his hand. You know, because you have been told, that the eyes behind the dark glasses are sightless, but you have at the same time a queer, not altogether comfortable, feeling that they are looking you through and through. Any one who lives constantly in that atmosphere must willy nilly be conscientious and square.

It is that same force of personality that carried him through the first



dark days, for his trouble came to him only about twenty years ago. Before that Mr. Thomas knew the beauties of nature as well as the rest of us, and perhaps to him they meant more. The delicate colors of the winging hummingbird, the wonders of the afterglow of the setting sun, the smile of a little child had all had their influence upon his mind. Perhaps it is that influence that still prevails and makes his personal and home life shut a naturally active and intelligent mind in upon itself, as it were, and dependent upon its own resources.

That these resources were endless it takes but a few moments' visit to the grocery shop to discover. Eight years ago there was a small business there for sale and Mr. Thomas bought it. And every one knows the retail grocery business is a most difficult one to manage, the hardest to organize into system. This even to a man possessed of all his faculties, to say nothing of one deprived of the chiefest of them. Nothing daunted, however, Mr. Thomas went to work.

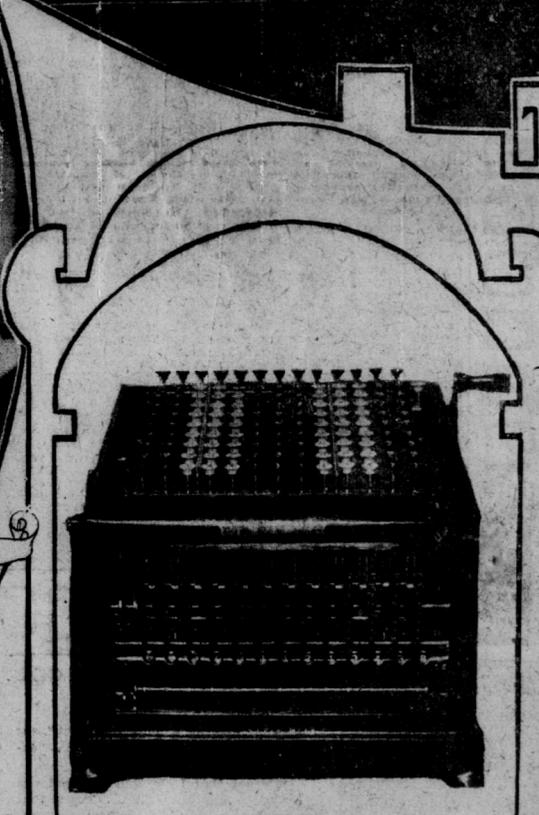
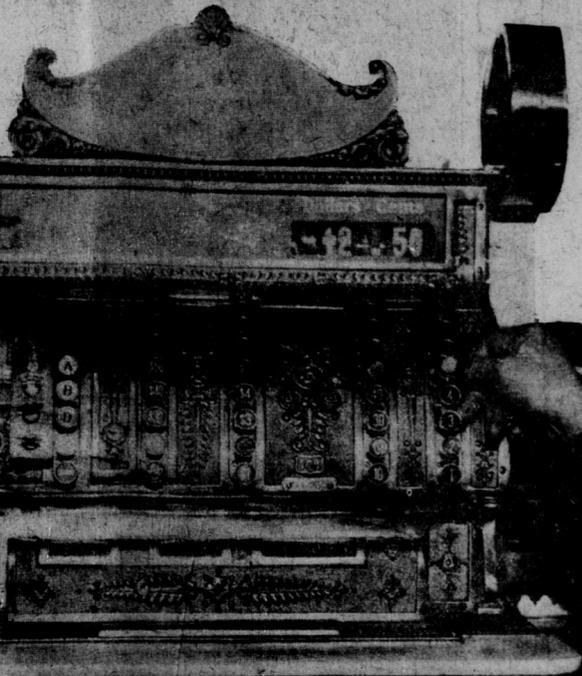
### Operates a Cash Register.

It grew slowly at first. The systems obtaining in ordinary shops run by ordinary men of ordinary attainments were not suited to the new conditions. W. B. Thomas was the new owner of the shop, and as such he was determined to know the minutest details of the business. To achieve this there were many things to be considered. First of all a cash register was needed, one which suited his peculiar case. According to Mr. Thomas' idea the register should be in the office, not on a counter in the shop and should be accessible to two people only—his bookkeeper and himself. To accomplish this a special machine was constructed with special levers, keys and drawers. Some of the keys at regular intervals have been covered with sand paper, so that Mr. Thomas can, readily and instantly place them. His manipulation of this machine and the facility

with which he makes change would cause many a man with the full use of his faculties to make up his mind to brush up his mental arithmetic. The other day a \$20 piece was sent speeding along the wire to the office, accompanied by a check for a 15-cent purchase. With the check came a request that \$5 of the change be in small silver. Mr. Thomas happened to be at the desk at the time. His bookkeeper offered to make the change. Not at all! Mr. Thomas chose to do it himself, and he did! The customer certainly had his request for small silver granted. There were nickels and dimes and quarters, whole bunches of them, enough to perplex and confound any one but Mr. Thomas.

The stock of the store is under the personal supervision of this keen business man. When stock is taken it is he who oversees the work. There certainly is a place for everything in his unique shop, and what is more, in quest of steps taken in a certain direction, Tien, turning abruptly to the right, he walked in the same manner toward the hardware department. Up went one hand, an individual nervous hand, one a palmer would like to read, touching ever so lightly two or three boxes, only to move quickly on to another. All at once he stopped and pulled out the drawer. "Isn't this what you want?" he asked, turning around. The customer was saved a trip downtown and Mr. Thomas had scored a point.

In this connection, one cannot but notice the consideration and attention shown Thomas by his employees, an attention accorded not so much to an afflicted fellow man as to an intimate friend. There are about ten of them and every one from the bookkeeper, who is his right hand bower, to the boy who "polishes up the handle of the big front door" watches and waits upon his employer with a personal interest. Every obstacle—a chair in his way, a box or stepladder, anything that would in any way retard or impede him and so make his affliction more keenly felt



THE BLIND MERCHANT GOES TO THE CASH REGISTER AND RINGS UP THE AMOUNT PURCHASED

THE ADDING MACHINE WHICH THOMAS INVENTED

—is quickly and quietly removed. Not that there is anything in this man's make-up that suggests dependence. On the contrary, it is an impression of inherent strength and self-contained reserve that one receives after a few minutes' conversation with him. And this impression is confirmed after watching the speed and precision with which he makes his unguided trips through the big store.

### Invents Business System.

Mr. Thomas is more than anything else an inventive genius. And his is the sort of invention that is practical—the kind that saves people work. The entire system upon which he runs his establishment is an original one and has been added to gradually through the eight years of his business career until he has brought it to its present state of perfection.

In the Thomas system the bookkeeper has no ledgers to confuse—no daybooks to perplex. He has systematized the keeping of the accounts until balancing has become a recreation and drawing up statements child's play. The cash register is his daily cashbook, registering not only sales, but actual cash received and cash paid out. The file is

his ledger and the result of the combination is that at a moment's notice the state of the finances of the W. B. Thomas Company can be ascertained. But his greatest pride—his greatest labor saving device is his adding machine, which occupies the place of honor in the office. The agent who made that particular sale must be a wonder. The task of selling an adding machine to a blind man is not on the face of it an easy or an alluring one. It was necessary to make the prospective purchaser see with the agent's eyes while feeling at the same time with his own fingers. However, the salesman had an easy job. Mr. Thomas' keen perception recognized at once that here was a machine which, if it could be made practical, would be of inestimable assistance to him in simplifying the office work and in enabling him to render statements of accounts himself. The order was given and created a commotion in the company's headquarters. All sorts and kinds of unique machines had been made to order, but this was the first and as far as is known is the only adding machine made for the individual use of the blind. The question was, how could it be made practical? How could such a machine meet all the requirements demanded of it? Nimble wits went to work and brains were culded in the determination to make this as far as possible a perfect machine for the special use for which it was designed. At last, after four months, it arrived. Never in his most sanguine moments had Mr. Thomas dreamed of such an aid in mechanical device. For one who could not see, there was of necessity some distinction to be made in the keys. There were 117 of them. Accordingly some of them were made convex, some concave, some surfaces were smooth, others rough. Then there were two relief keys. Placing his little fingers on these, Mr. Thomas had his bearings, and in less time than it takes to tell about it he can reel out a statement while you wait.

### THERE MAY BE SOMETHING IN A NAME AFTER ALL

**M**ANY names, illustrious and otherwise, have been rescued from oblivion by comparatively trivial circumstances. The story runs that Brougham, on being called by the Iron Duke as a man whose name would go down to posterity as a great lawyer, statesman, etc., but who would nevertheless be best known by the name of the carriage that had been christened after him, retorted that the Duke's name would no doubt be handed down to posterity as that of a great general and the hero of a hundred battles, but that he would be best remembered by a particular kind of boot named after him.

Keeping. One day not long ago a man came into the office and wanted a hurry-up statement of his account with the W. B. Thomas Company. No one was in the office at the time but Mr. Thomas and a clerk who knew nothing of the books or the accounts.

Without hesitation Thomas located the customer's number on the file. After that it was plain sailing. The clerk read out the dates and items while Mr. Thomas jotted them down on the adding machine. The man had already paid \$10 on account, and this was credited by the adjustment of red carbon in the machine. A twist of the handle, and the thing was finished. The account complete to date was drawn out. Thomas stamped the slip with a rubber stamp, copied after his letterhead and handed the statement over—all done within five minutes. There is probably not another store in the country where his feat could be duplicated in the same given time.

Answering the telephone, of course, is a simple matter. The bell rings, and Mr. Thomas starts immediately for the desk next to her. There is only inquiry as to the stock, in which case the party is told to hold the line, and Mr. Thomas starts off in quest of the desired article. Perhaps, however, it is a long order being sent in over the wire. Then comes a quick, buzzing sound, and without a word or question the bookkeeper drops her work and gets ready with pencil and order book. Mr. Thomas simply repeating the order once, this buzzing attachment to the telephone was an inspiration and dispenses with much extra work and confusion. The bookkeeper goes on quietly with her work regardless of what Mr. Thomas may be doing at the desk next to her. But the moment the buzzer calls she knows that she is wanted.

It is needless to say that the man at the head of this establishment is a man of advanced methods and progressive ideas. There is absolutely nothing "old fog" about him. He is a strong consolidationist and has for some time been the president of the Central Improvement Club of Oakland, a man who has the confidence and respect of all who know him. So through the darkness of twenty years Mr. Thomas has come to see the light—he has come to "see the stars shine through his cypress trees"—those trees whose thickly interwoven branches have thrown such shadows over his life. How many of us, groping in the same impenetrable darkness, would have made the record for ourselves that he has made?

however, is the name "sandwich," in memory of Lord Sandwich, who invented it as a means of taking a hasty lunch while engaged in his duties at the admiralty office.

Hobson, the Cambridge letter-carrier on whom Milton wrote two short poems, will probably always be better remembered through the expression "Hobson's choice." According to Steele, in the Spectator, the carrier kept a certain number of horses in his stables, which were so arranged that each should be taken out in turn, the choice being between the horse standing next the stable door at the time—"that or none."

Certain towns and districts, too, such as Xeres, Oporto, Champagne and Burgundy, are probably best known through the productions named after them; in fact, the two latter provinces ceased to exist after the substitution of departments for the old provinces, before the days of the French revolution. Cayenne is undoubtedly known better outside France for the red pepper it produces than for being the locality to which French convicts are transported while the town of Cognac, in France, owes its celebrity solely to the brandy distilled from its grapes. Cologne is, perhaps, more famous for its manufacture of eau de cologne than for its magnificent cathedral.

