

## DEXTER LADD THOMAS WHO HAS GROWN UP WITH OMAHA

Hoosier Boy Who Went to School with Garfield, Toted a Musket to the Sea With Sherman and Built a Home and Raised a Family in Omaha

**W**HEN the states of the union and the countries of the earth met together to determine what they should contribute collectively and severally to the upbuilding of the new commonwealth of Nebraska, Indiana occupied a front seat. That state proved itself one of the most liberal as well as one of the wealthiest states in manhood. The Hoosier state sent many strong citizens to help build up Nebraska and among them was Dexter L. Thomas.

He had lived a full life before he joined the tide of emigration and pursued the course of empire westward to the sunset side of the mighty Missouri river. He came of a family of pioneers which had taken root on the stony hills of Vermont before the revolutionary days. As New England filled up the Thomases moved westward into the wilderness, first to New York, then to Ohio and then on to Indiana. The father of Dexter L. Thomas kept a store in the little town of Newville, Ind., at the time of his son's birth, October 11, 1841. The father was also a man of high ideals in education and religion. He led a movement for the establishment of a higher institution of learning there in the little frontier town, and he built the Newville academy.

In this town young Thomas spent his boyhood and early youth. When he attained the age of 11 years he had reached the limit of education afforded by the village schools, and his father sent him to Hiram college, "Garfield's school," at Hiram, O. It wasn't a great distance from Newville to Hiram but it was round-about and the journey took several days. His elder brother accompanied him, and here is the way they went: To Hicksville over a muddy road; thence by a corduroy pike to the Maumee river, over which they went by ferry; then they walked two miles to Antwerp, where they abandoned themselves to the luxury of a packet on the Wabash & Erie canal. This packet was a marvel of speed, being drawn by three mules which went at a trot along the towpath. At the end of two days the travelers arrived in Toledo, where they took a boat for Cleveland, whence they engaged passage in a wagon and drove the last thirty-five miles to Hiram. Now, if the reader ever wants to journey from Newville to Hiram he will know the route, though, of course, today it is much quicker to go by rail.

### Schoolmate of Garfield

The school at Hiram gained its greatest fame, not from the standard of its scholastic course, which was good enough, but from the fact that James A. Garfield attended school there and later was principal of the institution. During Dexter L. Thomas' first years at Hiram, Garfield was a student. "A quiet sort of boy, very gentlemanly," he recalls him. The future president of the United States was "working his way," ringing the bell and performing other services and occupying a room in the basement of the building.

When young Thomas came back to Hiram in 1858, after having completed the course in the new academy at Newville, Garfield had risen to be principal of the school.

"He was a large man with thick bushy hair and a very fine complexion," says Mr. Thomas. He was very quiet spoken but a strict disciplinarian. I remember one time when some of the boys had been out on an escapade which was decidedly to their own discredit and to the discredit of the school, Garfield read their names before the school and then solemnly and sternly announced that they were expelled."

It was while Garfield was principal of this school that he was elected to the state senate. On that occasion the students at Hiram had a jollification. Young Thomas was always among the foremost in such affairs, and on this occasion he handled the "anvil guns" with such enthusiasm that he almost cut short his earthly career then and there. The anvil gun consists of two anvils, one inverted and the other set on top of it, so that the bottoms are together. There is a cup-like hole in the bottom of an anvil. This was filled with powder, the other anvil set on top of it and the powder touched off. The result was always a deafening explosion. On this occasion, however, the powder exploded the instant the upper anvil had been set on the lower one. The heavy iron was thrown upward and it was a very miracle that the young man escaped. Thereupon at the request of the senator-elect further demonstration was omitted.

During the war young Thomas met Garfield on several occasions, and always found him one of the pleasantest of men. He had been a Campbellite preacher and a man of profound religious convictions and deep theology prior to entering the army. In fact, his manners and tastes gave no promise in his youth that he would ever become a soldier or a statesman.

### Bound to Go to War

Young Thomas chafed under the restraint of his years during the first months of the civil war. In August, 1862, though he still lacked two months of his majority he enlisted as a private in the Eighty-eighth Indiana regiment at Fort Wayne. The regiment was hurried to the south and hurried into the theater of action without any delay, and on October 8, just three days before his twenty-first birthday, he went into his first battle at Perryville, Ky., where the union forces engaged Bragg's whole command.

Throughout the remainder of the great rebellion Mr. Thomas was in the thick of the fight, and the fact that he quickly rose from the ranks to a lieutenancy and then, became captain is indicative of the manner in which he bore himself under fire. He is proud of the fact that during three years' service in the thick of the fight he was never wounded—was not sick a day, and never missed a "trick" of duty. His success in escaping wounds was little short of marvelous. He seemed to bear a charmed life like Achilles. And if his mother, like the mother of the ancient Grecian warrior, had dipped him when a child in the river Styx to make him invulnerable, she had more foresight than the Greek goddess, and immersed even his heel in the magic stream.

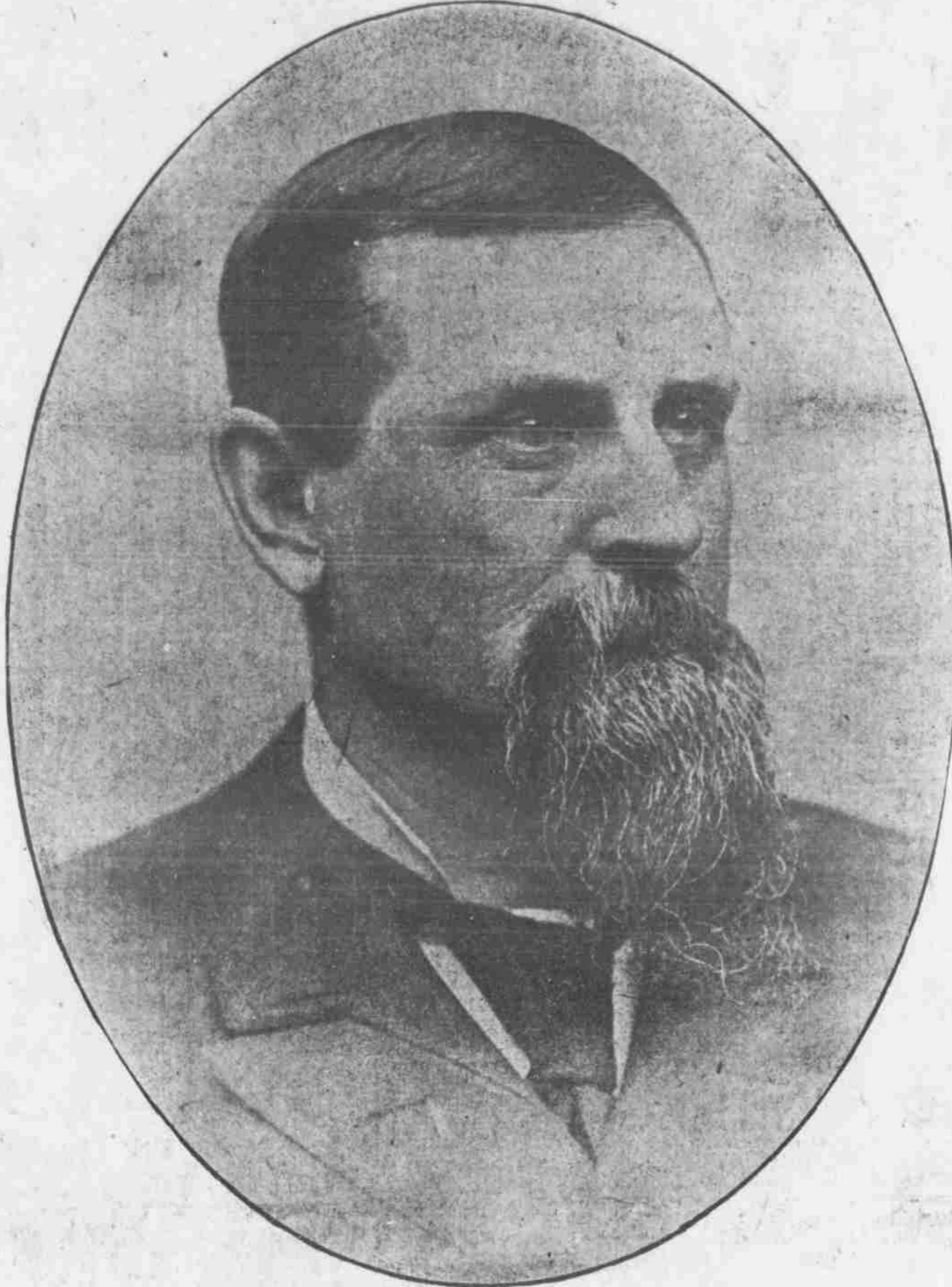
Though he was never injured, he had some very narrow escapes from wounds and death. One evening, at the battle of Stone River, which began December 31, 1862, and lasted four days, a Tennessee union regiment was by some mistake wheeled in behind the regiment to which Mr. Thomas' company was attached. The Tennesseans mistook their comrades for the enemy and fired upon them. Mr. Thomas, with three others, lay down behind a big tree for protection. The three were killed but Mr. Thomas escaped uninjured. He participated in the terrible charge up the Cumberland mountains in face of the fire of the "Jackass batteries." He was at the battle of Lookout mountains and at Chickamauga. He participated in the daring charge up Missionary ridge. He declares the rebels jumped, frightened, out of their rifle pits and dashed like startled rabbits through the union line and down the steep side of the ridge. That charge, he says, beat a rabbit hunt all to pieces. From there his regiment went to the south, fighting at Kenesaw Mountain, Burnt Hickory, Punkie Vine, and participating in numerous skirmishes.

### With Sherman to the Sea

His company was one of those to enter Atlanta when it was taken, and he and his comrades tore some of the fine houses to pieces to make floors for their tents. He was at Kingston, Ga., when the first intimation came that the regiment was to go south again and participate in that great march of Sherman from Atlanta to the sea.

"We got a 'grapevine' dispatch one day," he says, "stating that after all the trains had got up from the south we were to march down to Atlanta again. Sure enough, we were lined up next morning by the side of the track. Five trains passed us, going toward the north, each loaded down to the very platforms and roofs with soldiers, wounded and sick, sent home to the care of their families. As each train went past there would come a cheer from the wan, wasted heroes, torn and tattered and worn out. When five trains had passed us the command was given to march.

"We had orders to tear up the railroad as we went. This was done by lifting up the track from the roadbed at places, putting piles of ties underneath and then setting the ties on fire. The heat twisted the rails like wire. Some of them we took white hot and twisted fantastically around telegraph poles. We burned the bridges. After



DEXTER LADD THOMAS.

we were through with it, all marks of a railroad had disappeared. The 'remains' didn't even 'look natural.'

"We camped close to Atlanta, and one day I had occasion to go into the city. When I left to return to camp the flames had already started the devastation, which was not completed until the city was a mass of smoldering ruins."

His regiment went with Sherman to the sea, burning and laying waste the country through which they passed. One of their greatest troubles on this trip was to keep the darkies from following them, and at each stream a guard had to be left behind while the bridge was burned to keep the colored contingent from attaching itself to the army and impeding its movement. The dietary consisted chiefly of sweet potatoes on the march. But the words of the song that they "started from the ground" give a wrong impression. It took hard digging to get them. When the army arrived in Savannah about 100,000 bushels of rice were captured, upon which the soldiers feasted during the maneuvers which took place in that city.

Thence they returned to the north, and Mr. Thomas marched at the head of his company in that grand review of the union veterans held in Washington at the close of the war, when, between solid walls

of cheering crowds and past the reviewing stand where the president sat surrounded by the great generals who had commanded the brave men throughout the war, marched 250,000 of the country's surviving heroes. He was one of the battle-scarred veterans that were sent out on trains in every direction to return to the bosoms of their families after their long separation. What thoughts they did ride on coal cars and in box cars and on all manner of rude vehicles? They were greater idols than kings in golden chariots, and all along the line a grateful people greeted them with cheers.

### To the West and Omaha

The young man spent a few days at home and then took up his education where it had been interrupted by the call of his country. He entered Hiram college and remained there a year. Then, on account of the death of his father, he returned home for a time.

His first venture into the west was in 1867, when he went to Des Moines, Ia., and worked during the summer in the office of the register of deeds. While there he had the uncommon experience of recording a mortgage for \$3,000,000. It was filed by the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific railroad, and the money was for the purpose

of building that line from Des Moines to Omaha. The revenue stamps on the mortgage amounted to \$8,640.

He returned to Indiana in the fall of 1867 and taught the high school at Butler, a town near Newville. With the money thus earned he went to Ann Arbor, Mich., and entered the law department of the state university, where he pursued his studies with such success that he graduated in March, 1870, and was admitted to practice in Michigan.

He determined at once to cast in his lot with the west, went home for a few days, and having collected his belongings, set his face to the west, and on April 23, 1870, arrived in Council Bluffs and came across on the ferry to the lively little city of Omaha. Walking up the main street, he met Robert Steel, who directed him to a boarding house located on Farnam street, between Fifteenth and Sixteenth streets. With characteristic energy, he found a place at once and within twenty-four hours was installed in the law office of F. A. Beals. Six months later he was taken into the firm, which then became known as Beals, Allen & Thomas. Six months later he withdrew and opened a law and real estate office for himself. He has remained in this business since that time and has been a persistent booster for Omaha.

### Brought His Own Provender

In October, 1870, when he felt he had secured a footing in the new country, the young man made a flying trip to Ann Arbor, where he married Miss Frances I. Jeffries, daughter of Dr. Charles A. Jeffries. The young couple stopped only a few days at Mr. Thomas' home and then came direct to Omaha. On his second trip he remembers he arrived in the city like Benjamin Franklin, with his provisions in his hands. Mr. Thomas carried two sacks of buckwheat flour in one hand and a heavy pail of country butter in the other as he and his bride walked up Farnam street. It is a matter of pride to him even today that his wife prepared the first meal which they ate in the new country, and that it was made of material which they brought in with them.

Mr. Thomas proved as apt at building up in time of peace as he had been at burning, tearing down and devastating during the years of war. He has built many houses in Omaha, and has dealt in real estate very extensively. He was one of Omaha's wealthy citizens. In 1876 he built a handsome home at 956 North Twenty-seventh avenue, where he resided for twenty-five years.

At one time he held the title of "king of Florence." No, he was not one of the Florentine kings. He wore no crown, he held no scepter; he had no subjects bowing before him. The title of "king of Florence" was given him because of the fact that he was the largest owner of real estate in that suburb of Omaha. He has owned 1,000 lots in Florence, and, therefore, his title was not without good foundation.

In 1887 he became cashier of the Nebraska Savings bank and continued in that position seven years. But so closely did he apply himself to the affairs of the bank that his own interests suffered, and, therefore, he resigned and returned to his business exclusively.

### Active Aside From Business

Religious work and other activities of the same nature have engaged the attention of himself and Mrs. Thomas during the greater part of their residence in Omaha. He founded "Grace mission," on Twenty-sixth street between Hamilton and Caldwell streets, and was at the head of the work there for many years. He was one of the chief movers and most active workers in the erection of St. John's Episcopal church. When money was lacking his personal check often bridged over a threatened crisis. He has been a superintendent of Sunday schools in Omaha for more than twenty-five years.

He has been a member of the Grand Army of the Republic since its organization in 1867, and is also a member of the military order of the Loyal Legion, the organization of officers of the civil war.

He is particularly proud of his children. There are five of them, and all the boys are six footers. Hugh Spencer Thomas has charge of the electrical illumination of Luna Park, the big New York amusement resort; Guy Dexter Thomas, better known as "Mike," is a railroad man, a leading golf player, and champion golfer of the Omaha Field club; Charles Thomas is sporting editor of The Bee; Warren Clark Thomas is in the engineering department of the Union Pacific, and Miss Clara B. Thomas lives at home.

Time has dealt very gently with Mr. Thomas. Though sixty-six years of age he has the bustling energy of many young men of half his years. He has a vigorous memory, is good at a story and fond of a joke. It is one of the rules of his household that a special dinner must be prepared, with extra dishes, on the anniversary of each battle in which he took part. As the number of these battles is large, the yearly menu includes many special meals. Mr. Thomas is a hearty eater and it has always been a matter of question in his family whether this is not a quiet little scheme fixed up by him with ulterior motives of a gastronomic nature beyond the mere dead commemoration of the dates of great events.

Dexter L. Thomas is today one of the heartiest and sunniest optimists Omaha has. He has a host of friends and few enemies, for he is one of the "boys," of whom Holmes speaks, a big hearted, whole souled man.

## Gertrude Atherton's "White Fake" and Its Outcome

**B**EFORE she became a novelist, with breezy California girls for a heroine specialty, Gertrude Atherton served an apprenticeship as a writer of pot boilers for newspapers and things. Recently she told some friends whom she met on an overland train a diverting story of a mess of difficulty she contrived to get into early in her career as a penwoman, through to a bit of what she called "white faking."

"A magazine editor asked me to write an article about the girls who worked in the sweatshops of New York," she said. "I didn't know much about the sweatshop girls of New York, except that many of them wore very large, one-sided pompadours and that they would wear bedraggled feathers in their hats. But I didn't tell the magazine editor how little I knew about sweatshop girls. I was not throwing chances to write ordered articles over my shoulder, and if I had been ordered to write a treatise on the fourth dimension I certainly should have undertaken it at that time, albeit I never gained much of a mastery even over common fractions."

"So I sat down and wrote the article about the New York sweatshop girls. It was an exceedingly sympathetic article. It mentioned the hard, squalid life of the girls in the stuffy, unaired sweatshops, depicted how they were bulldozed by their cruel masters, pictured the bare rooms in the miserable tenement houses in which they lived when they weren't working, called attention to the pitiable pay they received for their work, dwelt impressively upon the temptations to which they were subjected and so on.

"However, when I read it over it struck me as being lacking in specific instances.

"Therefore—I strive to confess it—I decided to employ a bit of poetic license, as it were, and to draw a little upon my imagination. I sketched in the purely fictitious account of one of the sweatshop girls, the sole support of her widowed mother, who fell ill with typhoid. I pictured the girl and her mother living together in a miserable

room in an East Side tenement house, told of the terrible extremities to which they were reduced by the girl's illness, described how the mother was obliged to carry out and pawn all of the scanty furniture except the one bed in order to buy medicines; how the sweatshop girl's beautiful hair fell out, so that when she recovered she found it impossible to obtain employment because she was quite bald and lacked the money wherewith to purchase a wig, and so on—oh, it was very sad and slow-musicky. It was one of the most touching tales you ever heard of, and I declare that as I wrote it I felt honestly and truly sorry for the girl myself.

"Well, the story was printed with pictures, and one of the pictures, drawn by an artist with a perfect genius for making dreary and heart-breaking pictures, showed the sick girl in the bare room, her patient mother bending over her and ministering unto her.

"Something like two months after the article was printed in the magazine I received a letter from a gentleman living up at Sitka, Alaska. He wrote me that he had just got hold of a copy of the magazine containing my article about the New York sweatshop girls, and he stated that my account of the girl who had fallen ill had touched him to the quick. He fumed in his letter about a state of society that would permit such things to be. He enclosed a \$20 bill, and begged me to turn it over to the poor girl in order that she and her mother might not suffer for the necessities of life for a little while at least.

"Well, I leave you to picture the sort of quandary that put me in. That twenty-dollar bill all but scorched my fingers, and I thought and thought about what I should do with it; but for the life of me I couldn't think of any way out. Finally, after tossing all night over it, I had an inspiration. I had told one white one in my story. Why not wriggle out of the scrape by telling another one? So I sat down and wrote a letter to the gentleman living at Sitka, Alaska. I told him that since my article had gone to press

a noble-hearted young fellow, well able to provide for the girl, had come forward and made her an offer of marriage, and that they were then about to be married. I thanked him for the generous spirit which had actuated him in sending the money, but I stated that, in view of the approaching marriage, the girl would not need it, and so I returned the twenty-dollar bill to him. I thought that would settle the matter, and I rather preened myself over the ingenuity of my idea. Of course I was rather conscience-stricken over the business, but nevertheless I couldn't help but satter myself just a little bit over the clever way I had got out of the mess. Vain hope!

"About two months later I received another letter from the gentleman living at Sitka, Alaska. He re-enclosed the twenty-dollar bill, saying that he had read with delight my letter announcing the unfortunate girl's approaching marriage and requesting me to purchase some suitable gift with the \$20 and to bestow it upon the young woman at her marriage, with his best wishes. So there was another hard fence to take!

"But I was in the middle over my ears, and there was nothing else to do but to scramble out the best way I knew. I devoted three or four days of miserable thought to finding a way out of the new complication before I had another inspiration. Then I wrote another letter to the gentleman who lived at Sitka, Alaska.

"I told him that the girl and her fiance had been compelled to elope in order to get married owing to the opposition of his folks to his union with a sweatshop girl and that I had been unable to find out where they went, although I had ascertained that they had left New York for good. I returned the \$20 bill again, praising the sender of it for the kindness which had prompted him, and so on and so on.

"But it was the fateful \$20 bill, sure enough. Two months later it came back to me. The gentleman living at Sitka, Alaska, sent me a very long letter, in which he told me all of the circum-

stances of his life. He said that there wasn't much to do at Sitka, Alaska, except to read, but set forth the fact that he lived so far from civilization that he couldn't get hold of the kind of books he wanted. Therefore he returned the \$20 to me, saying that he knew that in the goodness of my heart I would be willing to devote the money to purchasing \$20 worth of books for him and having them shipped to Sitka, Alaska. He didn't say whether he wanted novels or biographical works or books of travel or history. Just books. There was no other way. I had to go out and spend an afternoon buying books for the gentleman living at Sitka, Alaska.

"Just as soon as ever he received those books the gentleman living at Sitka, Alaska, sat down and sent me a long, enthusiastic letter, saying that I had picked out just the kind of books he wanted. Then he went on to say that he had a number of little nieces living down in Alabama. The town in Alabama in which his little nieces lived didn't have much in the way of stores, he wrote, and, as Christmas was coming on, he would be enormously obliged if I would take the \$20 bill which he enclosed and buy a number of little gifts in the New York stores for his Alabama nieces. He told me the names and ages of the nieces, and requested me to use my own judgment as to what I should purchase for them by way of gifts. I had to execute that commission, of course, and take valuable time to execute it, too.

"For more than two years after that I was obliged to act as a sort of New York agent for the gentleman living at Sitka, Alaska. Any time he wanted anything in New York for himself or for his relatives living in the United States he would sit down and write me a laudatory letter and enclose the money. I resolutely performed every commission he asked me to perform. I had started the whole thing going by a white fake, but, white or no white, it was my duty to atone before Heaven for the sin, and I atoned. After two years of it, however, I went to Europe and remained there for several months.