
Marx
Machiavelli
Chesterton
Emerson
Joyce
Abbott
Hardy
Montaigne
Cooper
Austen
Defoe
Melville
Haggard
Hugo
Carroll
Christie
Eliot
Grimmer
Stoker
Molière
Wilde
Maupassant
Byron
Einstein
Fitzgerald
Engels
Schiller
Garnett
Hawthorne
Smith
Kafka
Goethe
Dostoyevsky
Cotton
Hall
Baum
Kipling
Doyle
Willis
Henry
Leslie
Dumas
Nietzsche
Flaubert
Turgenev
Balzac
Stockton
Vatsyayana
Crane
Burroughs
Verne
Curtis
Tocqueville
Whitman
Gogol
Vinci
Homer
Widger
Tolstoy
Busch
Darwin
Thoreau
Potter
Freud
Zola
Twain
Scott
Lawrence
Plato
Kant
Jowett
Stevenson
Dickens
Harte
Andersen
Burton
Hesse
London
Descartes
Cervantes
Poe
Aristotle
Wells
Voltaire
Hale
James
Hastings
Cooke
Bunner
Shakespeare
Irving
Richter
Chambers
Chekhov
da
Doré
Swift
Dante
Shaw
Benedict
Alcott
Wodehouse
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The Little City of Hope A Christmas Story

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CONTENTS

I

[1]

HOW JOHN HENRY OVERHOLT SAT ON PANDORA'S BOX

"Hope is very cheap. There's always plenty of it about."

"Fortunately for poor men. Good morning."

With this mild retort and civil salutation John Henry Overholt rose and went towards the door, quite forgetting to shake hands with Mr. Burnside, though the latter made a motion to do so. Mr. Burnside always gave his hand in a friendly way, even when he had flatly refused to do what people had asked of him. It was cheap; so he gave it.

But he was not pleased when they did not take it, for whatever he chose to give seemed [2]of some value to him as soon as it was offered; even his hand. Therefore, when his visitor forgot to take it, out of pure absence of mind, he was offended, and spoke to him sharply before he had time to leave the private office.

"You need not go away like that, Mr. Overholt, without shaking hands."

The visitor stopped and turned back at once. He was thin and rather shabbily dressed. I know many poor men who are fat, and some who dress very well; but this was not that kind of poor man.

"Excuse me," he said mildly. "I didn't mean to be rude. I quite forgot."

He came back, and Mr. Burnside shook hands with becoming coldness, as having just given a lesson in manners. He was not a bad man, nor a miser, nor a Scrooge, but he was a great stickler for manners, especially with people who had nothing to give him. Besides, he had already lent Overholt money; or, to put it nicely, he had invested a little in his invention, and he did not see any reason why he should invest any more until it succeeded. Overholt called it selling shares, but Mr. Burnside called it borrowing money. Overholt was sure that if he could raise more [3]funds, not much more,

he could make a success of the "Air-Motor"; Mr. Burnside was equally sure that nothing would ever come of it. They had been explaining their respective points of view to each other, and in sheer absence of mind Overholt had forgotten to shake hands.

Mr. Burnside had no head for mechanics, but Overholt had already made an invention which was considered very successful, though he had got little or nothing for it. The mechanic who had helped him in its construction had stolen his principal idea before the device was patented, and had taken out a patent for a cheap little article which every one at once used, and which made a fortune for him. Overholt's instrument took its place in every laboratory in the world; but the mechanic's labour-saving utensil took its place in every house. It was on the strength of the valuable tool of science that Mr. Burnside had invested two thousand dollars in the Air-Motor without really having the smallest idea whether it was to be a machine that would move the air, or was to be moved by it. A number of business men had done the same thing.

[4]Then, at a political dinner in a club, three of the investors had dined at the same small table, and in an interval between the dull speeches, one of the three told the others that he had looked into the invention and that there was nothing in Overholt's motor after all. Overholt was crazy.

"It's like this," he had said. "You know how a low-pressure engine acts; the steam does a part of the work and the weight of the atmosphere does the rest. Now this man Overholt thinks he can make the atmosphere do both parts of the work with no steam at all, and as that's absurd, of course, he won't get any more of my money. It's like getting into a basket and trying to lift yourself up by the handles."

Each of the two hearers repeated this simple demonstration to at least a dozen acquaintances, who repeated it to dozens of others; and after that John Henry Overholt could not raise another dollar to complete the Air-Motor.

Mr. Burnside's refusal had been definite and final, and he had been the last to whom the investor had applied, merely because he was undoubtedly the most close-fisted man [5]of business of all who had invested in the invention.

Overholt saw failure before him at the very moment of success, with the not quite indifferent accompaniment of starvation. Many a man as good as he has been in the same straits, even more than once in life, and has succeeded after all, and Overholt knew this quite well, and therefore did not break down, nor despair, nor even show distinct outward signs of mental distress.

Metaphorically, he took Pandora's box to the Park, put it in a sunny corner, and sat upon it, to keep the lid down, with Hope inside, while he thought over the situation.

It was not at all a pleasant one. It is one thing to have no money to spare, but it is quite another to have none at all, and he was not far from that. He had some small possessions, but those with which he was willing to part were worth nothing, and those which would bring a little money were the expensive tools and valuable materials with which he was working. For he worked alone, profiting by his experience with the mechanic who had robbed him of one of his most profitable patents. When the idea of [6]the Air-Motor had occurred to him he had gone into a machine-shop and had spent nearly two years in learning the use of fine tools. Then he had bought what he needed out of the money invested in his idea, and had gone to work himself, sending models of such castings as he required to different parts of the United States, that the pieces might be made independently.

He was not an accomplished workman, and he made slow progress with only his little son to help him when the boy was not at school. Often, through lack of skill, he wasted good material, and more than once he spoiled an expensive casting, and was obliged to wait till it could be made again and sent to him. Besides, he and the boy had to live, and living is dear nowadays, even in a cottage in an out-of-the-way corner of Connecticut; and he needed fire and light in abundance for his work, besides something to eat and decent clothes to wear and somebody to cook the dinner; and when he took out his diary note-book and examined the figures on the page near the end, headed "Cash Account, November," he made out that he had three hundred and eighteen dollars and twelve [7]cents to his credit, and nothing to come after that, and he knew that the men who had believed in him had invested, amongst them, ten thousand

dollars in shares, and had paid him the money in cash in the course of the past three years, but would invest no more; and it was all gone.

One thousand more, clear of living expenses, would do it. He was positively sure that it would be enough, and he and the boy could live on his little cash balance, by great economy, for four months, at the end of which time the Air-Motor would be perfected. But without the thousand the end of the four months would be the end of everything that was worth while in life. After that he would have to go back to teaching in order to live, and the invention would be lost, for the work needed all his time and thought.

He was a mathematician, and a very good one, besides being otherwise a man of cultivated mind and wide reading. Unfortunately for himself, or the contrary, if the invention ever succeeded, he had given himself up to higher mathematics when a young man, instead of turning his talent to account in an architect's office, a shipbuilding yard, or a loco [8]motive shop. He could find the strain at any part of an iron frame building by the differential and integral calculus to the millionth of an ounce, but the everyday technical routine work with volumes of ready-made tables was unfamiliar and uncongenial to him; he would rather have calculated the tables themselves. The true science of mathematics is the most imaginative and creative of all sciences, but the mere application of mathematics to figures for the construction of engines, ships, or buildings is the dullest sort of drudgery.

Rather than that, he had chosen to teach what he knew and to dream of great problems at his leisure when teaching was over for the day or for the term. He had taught in a small college, and had known the rare delight of having one or two pupils who were really interested. It had been a good position, and he had married a clever New England girl, the daughter of his predecessor, who had died suddenly. They had been very happy together for years, and one boy had been born to them, whom his father insisted on christening Newton. Then Overholt had thrown up his employment for the sake of [9]getting freedom to perfect his invention, though much against his wife's advice, for she was a prudent little woman, besides being clever, and she thought of the future of the two beings

she loved, and of her own, while her husband dreamed of hastening the progress of science.

Overholt came to New York because he could work better there than elsewhere, and could get better tools made, and could obtain more easily the materials he wanted. For a time everything went well enough, but when the investors began to lose faith in him things went very badly.

Then Mrs. Overholt told her husband that two could live where three could not, especially when one was a boy of twelve; and as she would not break his heart by teasing him into giving up the invention as a matter of duty, she told him that she would support herself until it was perfected or until he abandoned it of his own accord. She was very well fitted to be a governess; she was thirty years old and as strong as a pony, she said, and she had friends in New England who could find her a situation. He should see her whenever it was possible, she added, but there was no other way.

[10]Now it is not easy to find a thoroughly respectable married governess of unexceptionably good manners, who comes of a good stock and is able to teach young ladies. Such a person is a treasure to rich people who need somebody to take charge of their girls while they fly round and round the world in automobiles, seeking whom they may destroy. Therefore Mrs. Overholt obtained a very good place before long, and when the family in which she taught had its next attack of European fever and it was decided that the girls must stay in Munich to improve their German and their music, Mrs. Overholt was offered an increase of salary if she would take them there and see to it, while their parents quartered Germany, France, Spain, and Austria at the rate of forty miles an hour, or even fifty and sixty where the roads were good. If the parents broke their necks, Mrs. Overholt would take the children home; but this was rather in the understanding than in the agreement.

Such was the position when John Henry sat down upon the lid of Pandora's box in a sunny corner of the Central Park and reflected on Mr. Burnside's remark that "there [11]was plenty of hope about." The inventor thought that there was not much, but such as it was, he did not mean to part with it on the ground that the man of business had called it "cheap."

He resolved his feelings into factors and simplified the form of each; and this little mathematical operation showed that he was miserable for three reasons.

The first was that there was no money for the tangent balance of the Air-Motor, which was the final part, on which he had spent months of hard work and a hundred more than half sleepless nights.

The second was that he had not seen his wife for nearly a year, and had no idea how long it would be before he saw her again, and he was just as much in love with her as he had been fourteen years ago, when he married her.

The third, and not the least, was that Christmas was coming, and he did not see how in the world he was to make a Christmas out of nothing for Newton, seeing that a thirteen-year-old boy wants everything under the sun to cheer him up when he has no brothers and sisters, and school is closed for [12]the holidays, and his mother is away from home, and there is nobody but a dear old tiresome father who has his nose over a lathe all day long unless he is blinding himself with calculating quaternions for some reason that no lad, and very few men, can possibly understand. John Henry was obliged to confess that hope was not much of a Christmas present for a boy in Newton's surroundings.

For the surroundings would be dismal in the extreme. A rickety cottage on an abandoned Connecticut farm that is waiting for a Bohemian emigrant to make it pay is not a gay place, especially when two-thirds of the house has been turned into a workshop that smells everlastingly of smith's coal, brass filings, and a nauseous chemical which seemed to be necessary to the life of the Air-Motor, and when the rest of the house is furnished in a style that would make a condemned cell look attractive by contrast.

Besides, it would rain or snow, and it rarely snowed in a decent Christian manner by Christmas. It snowed slush, as Newton expressed it. A certain kind of snow-slush makes nice hard snowballs, it is true, just like stones, but when there is no other boy [13]to fight, it is no good. Overholt had once offered to have a game of snowballing with his son on a Saturday afternoon in winter; and the invitation was accepted with alacrity. But it was never extended again.

The boy was a perfect terror at that form of diversion. Yet so distressed was Overholt at the prospect of a sad Christmas for his son that he even thought of voluntarily giving up his thin body to the torment again on the 25th of December, if that would amuse Newton and make it seem less dull for him. Good-will towards men, and even towards children, could go no further than that, even at Christmas time. At least Overholt could think of no greater sacrifice that might serve.

For what are toys to a boy of thirteen? He wants a gun and something to kill, or he wants a boat in which he can really sail, or a live pony with a real head, a real tail, and four real legs, one at each corner. That had been Newton's definition of the desired animal when he was six years old, and some one had given him a wooden one on rockers with the legs painted on each side. Girls of thirteen can still play with dolls, and John Henry had read that, far away in ancient times, girls [14]dedicated their dolls, with all the dolls' clothes, to Artemis on the eve of their wedding-day. But no self-respecting boy of thirteen cares a straw for anything that is not real, except an imaginary pain that will keep him away from school without cutting down his rations; and in the invention and presentation of such fictitious suffering he beats all the doll-makers in Germany and all the playwrights and actors in the world. You must have noticed that the pain is always as far from the stomach as is compatible with probability. Toothache is a grand thing, for nobody can blame a healthy boy for eating then, if he can only bear the pain. And he can, and does, bear it nobly, though with awful faces. The little beast knows that all toothaches do not make your cheek swell. Then there is earache; that is a splendid invention; it goes through your head like a red-hot corkscrew with a powerful brakeman at the other end, turning it steadily—between meals. Only certain kinds of things really serve to make him stop. Ice-cream is one, and it takes a great deal of it. It is well known that ice will cool a red-hot corkscrew.

But this is a digression, for no boy ever [15]has any pain at Christmas; it is only afterwards that it comes on; usually about ten days.

After an hour Overholt came to the conclusion that he had better take Pandora's box out to the cottage and sit on it there, since nothing suggested itself to him, in spite of his immense good-will to accept any suggestion which the spirit of coming Christmas might be kind enough to offer; and if he could do nothing else, he could at least work at his machine, and try to devise some means of constructing the tangent-balance, with the materials he had left, and perhaps, by the time he was thoroughly grimy and the workshop smelt like the Biblical bottomless pit, something would occur to him for Newton.

He could also write a letter to his wife, a sort of anticipatory Christmas letter, and send her the book he had bought as a little gift, wrapping it in nice white paper first, tied with a bit of pale green ribband which she had left behind her, and which he had cherished nearly a year, and marking it "to be opened on Christmas morning"; and the parcel should then be done up securely in good brown grocer's paper and addressed to her, and even [16]registered, so that it could not possibly be lost. It was a pretty book, and also a very excellent book, which he knew she wanted and would read often, so it was as well to take precautions. He wished that Newton wanted a book, or even two or three, or magazines with gaily coloured pictures, or anything that older or younger boys would have liked a little. But Newton was at that age which comes sooner or later to every healthy boy, and the sight of a book which he was meant to read and ought to read was infinitely worse than the ugliest old toad that ever flops out of a hollow tree at dusk, spitting poison and blinking his devilish little eyes at you when you come too near him.

Overholt had been brought up by people who lived in peace and good-will towards men, in a city where the spirit of Christmas still dwells, and sleeps most of the time, but wakens every year, like a giant of good courage and good cheer, at the sound of the merry bells across the snow, and to the sweet carol under the windows in the frosty night. The Germans say that bad men have no songs; and we and all good fellows may say that bad [17]people have no Christmas, and though they copy the letter they know not the spirit; and I say that a copied Christmas is no Christmas at all, because Christmas is a feast of hearts and not of poor bits of cut-down trees

stuck up in sawdust and covered with lights and tinsel, even if they are hung with the most expensive gewgaws and gimcracks that ever are bought for gifts by people who are expected to give, whether they like or not. But when the heart for Christmas is there and is beating, then a very little tree will do, if there be none better to the hand.

Overholt thought so, while the train rumbled, creaked, and clattered and jerked itself along, as only local trains can, probably because they are old and rheumatic and stiff and weak in the joints, like superannuated crocodiles, though they may have once been young express trains, sleek and shiny, and quick and noiseless as bright snakes.

Overholt thought so, too; but the trouble was that he saw not even the least little mite of a tree in sight for his boy when the 25th of December should come. And it was coming, and was only a month away; and time is not a local train that stops at every [18]station, and then kicks itself on a bit to stop at the next; it is the "Fast Limited," and, what is more, it is the only one we can go by; and we cannot get out, because it never stops anywhere.

[19]II

HOW A MAN AND A BOY FOUNDED THE LITTLE CITY OF HOPE

Overholt's boy came home from school at the usual hour with his books buckled together in an old skate strap, which had never been very good because the leather was too soft and tore from one hole to the next; but it served very well for the books, as no great strain was caused by an arithmetic thumbed to mushiness, a history in the same state, and a geography of which the binding gave in and doubled up from sheer weariness, while the edges were so worn that the eastern coast of China and Siberia had quite disappeared.

He was a good-looking lad, not tall for his age, but as tough as a street cat in hard [20]training. He had short and thick brown hair, a clear complexion, his father's energetically intellectual features, though only half developed yet, a boldly-set mouth, and his mother's kindly, practical blue eyes. For surely the eyes of practical peo-

ple are always quite different from those of all others; and not many people are practical, though I never knew anybody who did not think he or she was, except pinchbeck artists, writers, and players, who are sure that since they must be geniuses, it is necessary to be Bohemians in order to show it. The really big ones are always trying to be practical, like Sir Isaac Newton when he ordered a good-sized hole to be cut in his barn door for the cat, and a little one next it for the kitten.

But Newton Overholt did not at all resemble his great namesake. He was a practical young soul, and had not yet developed the American disease which consists in thinking of two things at the same time. John Henry had it badly, for he had been thinking of the tangent-balance, his wife, his boy, and the coming Christmas, all together, since he had got home, and the three problems had got mixed and had made his head ache.

[21]Nevertheless he looked up from his work-table and smiled when his son came in.

"Everything all right?" he asked, with an attempt to be cheerful.

"Oh yes, fine," answered the boy, looking at the motionless model for the five-hundredth time, and sticking his hands into his pockets. "I'm only third in mathematics yet, but I'm head in everything else. I wish I had your brains, father! I'd be at the head of the arithmetic class in half a shake of a lamb's tail if I had your brains."

So far as mathematics were concerned this sounded probable to John Henry, who would have considered the speed of the tail to be a variable function of lamb, depending on the value of mother, plus or minus milk.

"Well," he said in an encouraging tone, "I never could remember geography, so it makes us even."

"I'd like to know how!" cried the boy in a tone of protest. "You could do sums, and you grew up to be a great mathematician and inventor. But what is the good of a geographician, anyway? They can only make school-books. They never invent anything, do they? You can't invent geography, can [22]you? At least you can, and some boys do, but they go to the bottom of the class like lead. It's safer to invent history than geography, isn't it, father?"

Overholt's clever mouth twitched.

"It's much safer, my boy. Almost all historians have found it so."

"There! I said so to-day, and now you say just the same thing. I don't believe one word of ancient history. Not—one—word! They wrote it about their own nations, didn't they? All right. Then you might just as well expect them to tell what really happened, as think that I'd tell on another boy in my own school. I must say it would be as mean as dog pie of them if they did, but all the same that does not make history true, does it?"

Newton had a practical mind. His father, who had not, meditated with unnecessary gravity on the boy's point of view and said nothing.

"For instance," continued the lad, sitting down on the high stool before the lathe Overholt was not using, "the charge of Balaclava's a true story, because it's been told by both sides; but they all say that it did no [23]good, anyway, except to make poetry of. But Marathon! Nobody had a chance to say a word about it except the Greeks themselves, and they weren't going to allow that the Persians wiped up the floor with them, were they? Why should they? And if Balaclava had happened then, those Greek fellows would have told us that the Light Brigade carried the Russian guns back with them across their saddles, wouldn't they? I say, father!"

"What is it?" asked Overholt, looking up, for he had gone back to his work and was absorbed in it.

"The boys are all beginning to talk about Christmas down at the school. Now what are we going to do at Christmas? I've been wondering."

"So have I!" responded the man, laying down the screw-plate with which he was about to cut a fine thread on the end of a small brass rod for the tangent-balance. "I've been thinking about it a good deal to-day, and I haven't decided on anything."

"Let's have turkey and cranberry sauce, anyway," said Newton thoughtfully, for he had a practical mind. "And I suppose we can have ice-cream if it freezes and we can [24]get some ice. Snow does pretty well if you pack it down tight enough with salt, and go on

putting in more when it melts. Barbara doesn't make ice-cream as well as they do in New York. She puts in a lot of winter-green and too little cocoanut. But it's not so bad. We can have it, can't we, father?"

"Oh yes. Turkey, cranberry sauce, and ice-cream. But that isn't a whole Christmas!"

"I don't see what else you want, I'm sure," answered the boy thoughtfully. "I mean if it's a big turkey and there's enough ice-cream—cream-cakes, maybe. You get good cream-cakes at Bangs's, two for five cents. They're not very big, but they're all right inside—all gooey, you know. Can you think of anything else?"

"Not to eat!"

"Oh, well then, what's the matter with our Christmas? I can't see. No school and heaps of good gobbles."

"Good what?" Overholt looked at the boy with an inquiring glance, and then understood. "I see! Is that the proper word?"

"When there's lots, it is," answered Newton with conviction. "Of course, there [25]are all sorts of things I'd like to have, but it's no good wishing you could lay Columbus's egg and hatch the American eagle, is it?[*The writer acknowledges his indebtedness for this fact in natural and national history to his aunt, Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, to whom it was recently revealed in the course of making an excellent speech.*] What would you like, father, if you could choose?"

"Three things," answered Overholt promptly. "I should like to see that wheel going round, softly and steadily, all Christmas Day. I should like to see that door open and your mother coming in."

"You bet I would too!" cried Newton, dropping from bold metaphor to vulgar vernacular. "Well, what's the third thing? You said there were three."

"I should like you to have a real, old-fashioned, glorious Christmas, my boy, such as you had when you were smaller, before we left the house where you were born."

"Oh well, you mustn't worry about me, father; if there's plenty of turkey and ice-cream and the cream-cakes, I can stand it. Mother can't come, anyhow, so that's settled, and it's no use to think about

it. But the [26]motor—that's different. There's hope, anyway. The wheel may go round. If you didn't hope so, you wouldn't go on fussing over it, would you? You'd go and do something else. They always say hope's better than nothing."

"It's about all we shall have left for Christmas, so we may as well build as much on it as we can."

"I love building," said Newton. "I like to stand and watch a bricklayer just putting one brick on another and making the wall grow."

"Perhaps you'll turn out an architect."

"I'd like to. I never showed you my city, did I?" He knew very well that he had not, and his father looked at him inquiringly. "No. Oh well, you won't care to see it."

"Yes, I should! But I don't understand. What sort of a city do you mean?"

"Oh, it's nothing," answered the boy, affecting carelessness. "It's only a little paper city on a board. I don't believe you'd care to see it, father. Let's talk about Christmas."

"No. I want to see what you have made. Where is it? I'll go with you."

[27]Newton laughed.

"I'll bring it, if you really want me to. It's easy enough to carry. The whole thing's only paper!"

He left the workshop and returned before Overholt had finished cutting the thread of the screw he was making. The man turned as the boy pushed the door open with his foot, and came in carrying what had evidently once been the top of a deal table.

On the board he had built an ingenious model of a town, or part of one, but it was not finished. It was entirely made of bits of cardboard, chips of wood, the sides of match-boxes, and odds and ends of all sorts, which he picked up wherever he saw them and brought home in his pocket for his purpose. He had an immense supply of such stuff stored away, much more than he could ever use.

Overholt looked at it with admiration, but said nothing. It was the college town where he had lived so happily and hoped to live

again. It was distinctly recognisable, and many of the buildings were not only cleverly made, but were coloured very like the originals. He was so much interested that he forgot to say anything.

" [28]It's a silly thing, anyway," said Newton, disappointed by his silence. "It's like toys!"

Overholt looked up, and the boy saw his pleased face.

"It's very far from silly," he said. "I believe you're born to be a builder, boy! It's not only not silly, but it's very well done indeed!"

"I'll bet you can't tell what the place is," observed Newton, a secret joy stealing through him at his father's words.

"Know it? I should think I did, and I wish we were there now! Here's the College, and there's our house in the street on the other side of the common. The church is first-rate, it's really like it—and there's the Roman Catholic Chapel and the Public Library in Main Street."

"Why, you really do recognise the places!" cried Newton in delight. "I didn't think anybody'd know them!"

"One would have to be blind not to, if one knew the town," said Overholt. "And there's the dear old lane!" He was absorbed in the model. "And the three hickory trees, and even the little bench!"

" [29]Why, do you remember that bench, father?"

Overholt looked up again, quickly and rather dreamily.

"Yes. It was there that I asked your mother to marry me," he said.

"Not really? Then I'm glad I put it in!"

"So am I, for the dear old time's sake and for her sake, and for yours, my boy. Tell me when you made this, and how you can remember it all so well."

The lad sat down on the high stool again before the lathe and looked through the dingy window at the scraggy trees outside, beyond the forlorn yard.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "I kind of remember it, I suppose, because I liked it better than this. And when I first had the idea I was sitting out there in the yard looking at this board. It belongs to a