THOMAS NELSON PAGE

HOW THE CAPTAIN MADE CHRISTMAS & OTHER CHRISTMAS STORIES

Thomas Nelson Page

How the Captain made Christmas & Other Christmas Stories

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Santa Claus's Partner

(Thomas Nelson Page)

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To My Father

who among all the men the writer knew in his youth was the most familiar with books; and who of all the men the writer has ever known has exemplified best the virtue of open-handedness, this little Book is affectionately inscribed by his son,

THE AUTHOR

Chapter I

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Berryman Livingstone was a successful man, a very successful man, and as he sat in his cushioned chair in his inner private office (in the best office-building in the city) on a particularly snowy evening in December, he looked it every inch. It spoke in every line of his clean-cut, self-contained face, with its straight, thin nose, closely drawn mouth, strong chin and clear gray eyes; in every movement of his erect, trim, well-groomed figure; in every detail of his faultless attire; in every tone of his assured, assertive, incisive speech. As some one said of him, he always looked as if he had just been ironed.

He used to be spoken of as "a man of parts;" now he was spoken of as "a man of wealth—a capitalist."

Not that he was as successful as he intended to be; but the way was all clear and shining before him now. It was now simply a matter of time. He could no more help going on to further heights of success than his "gilt-edged" securities, stored in thick parcels in his safe-deposit boxes, could help bearing interest.

He contemplated the situation this snowy evening with a deep serenity that brought a transient gleam of light to his somewhat cold face.

He knew he was successful by the silent envy with which his acquaintances regarded him; by the respect with which he was treated and his opinion was received at the different Boards, of which he was now an influential member, by men

who fifteen years ago hardly knew of his existence. He knew it by the numbers of invitations to the most fashionable houses which crowded his library table; by the familiar and jovial air with which presidents and magnates of big corporations, who could on a moment's notice change from warmth—temperate warmth—to ice, greeted him; and by the cajoling speeches with which fashionable mammas with unmarried daughters of a certain or uncertain age rallied him about his big, empty house on a fashionable street, and his handsome dinners, where only one thing was wanting—the thing they had in mind.

Berryman Livingstone had, however, much better proof of success than the mere plaudits of the world. Many men had these who had no real foundation for their display. For instance, "Meteor" Broome the broker, had just taken the big house on the corner above him, and had filled his stable with high-stepping, high-priced horses—much talked of in the public prints—and his wife wore jewels as handsome as Mrs. Parke-Rhode's who owned the house and twenty more like it. Colonel Keightly was one of the largest dealers on 'Change this year and was advertised in all the papers as having made a cool million and a half in a single venture out West. Van Diver was always spoken of as the "Grain King," "Mining King," or some other kind of Royalty, because of his infallible success, and Midan touch.

But though these and many more like them were said to have made in a year or two more than Livingstone with all his pains had been able to accumulate in a score of years of earnest toil and assiduous devotion to business; were now invited to the same big houses that Livingstone visited, and

were greeted by almost as flattering speeches as Livingstone received, Livingstone knew of discussions as to these men at Boards other than the "festal board," and of "stiffer" notes that had been sent them than those stiff and sealed missives which were left at their front doors by liveried footmen.

Livingstone, however, though he "kept out of the papers," having a rooted and growing prejudice against this form of vulgarity, could at any time, on five minutes' notice, establish the solidity of his foundation by simply unlocking his safe-deposit boxes. His foundation was as solid as gold.

On the mahogany table-desk before him lay now a couple of books: one a long, ledger-like folio in the russet covering sacred to the binding of that particular kind of work which a summer-hearted Writer of books years ago inscribed as "a book of great interest;" the other, a smaller volume, a memorandum book, more richly attired than its sober companion, in Russia leather.

For an hour or two Mr. Livingstone, with closely-drawn, thin lips, and eager eyes, had sat in his seat, silent, immersed, absorbed, and compared the two volumes, from time to time making memoranda in the smaller book, whilst his clerks had sat on their high stools in the large office outside looking impatiently at the white-faced clock on the wall as it slowly marked the passing time, or gazing enviously and grumblingly out of the windows at the dark, hurrying crowds below making their way homeward through the falling snow.

The young men could not have stood it but for the imperturbable patience and sweet temper of the oldest man

in the office, a quiet-faced, middle-aged man, who, in a low, cheery, pleasant voice, restrained their impatience and soothed their ruffled spirits.

Even this, however, was only partially successful.

"Go in there, Mr. Clark, and tell him we want to go home," urged fretfully one youth, a tentative dandy, with a sharp nose and blunt chin, who had been diligently arranging his vivid necktie for more than a half-hour at a little mirror on the wall.

"Oh! He'll be out directly now," replied the older man, looking up from the account-book before him.

"You've been saying that for three hours!" complained the other.

"Well, see if it doesn't come true this time," said the older clerk, kindly. "He'll make it up to you."

This view of the case did not seem to appeal very strongly to the young man; he simply grunted.

"*I*'m going to give him notice. I'll not be put upon this way—" bristled a yet younger clerk, stepping down from his high stool in a corner and squaring his shoulders with martial manifestations.

This unexpected interposition appeared to be the outlet the older grumbler wanted.

"Yes, you will!" he sneered with disdain, turning his eyes on his junior derisively. He could at least bully Sipkins.

For response, the youngster walked with a firm tread straight up to the door of the private office; put out his hand so quickly that the other's eyes opened wide; then turned so suddenly as to catch his derider's look of wonder; stuck out

his tongue in triumph at the success of his ruse, and walked on to the window.

"He'll be through directly, see if he is not," reiterated the senior clerk with kindly intonation. "Don't make a noise, there's a good fellow;" and once more John Clark, the dean of the office, guilefully buried himself in his columns.

"He must be writing his love-letters. Go in there, Hartley, and help him out. You're an adept at that," hazarded the youngster at the window to the dapper youth at the mirror.

There was a subdued explosion from all the others but Clark, after which, as if relieved by this escape of steam, the young men quieted down, and once more applied themselves to looking moodily out of the windows, whilst the older clerk gave a secret peep at his watch, and then, after another glance at the closed door of the private office, went back once more to his work.

Meantime, within his closed sanctum Livingstone still sat with intent gaze, poring over the page of figures before him. The expression on his face was one of profound satisfaction. He had at last reached the acme of his ambition—that is, of his later ambition. (He had once had other aims.) He had arrived at the point towards which he had been straining for the last eight—ten—fifteen years—he did not try to remember just how long—it had been a good while. He had at length accumulated, "on the most conservative estimate" (he framed the phrase in his mind, following the habit of his Boards)—he had no need to look now at the page before him: the seven figures that formed the balance, as he thought of them, suddenly appeared before him in facsimile. He had been gazing at them so steadily that now even when

he shut his eyes he could see them clearly. It gave him a little glow about his heart;—it was quite convenient: he could always see them.

It was a great sum. He had attained his ambition.

Last year when he balanced his books at the close of the year, he had been worth only—a sum expressed in six figures, even when he put his securities at their full value. Now it could only be written in seven figures, "on the most conservative estimate."

Yes, he had reached the top. He could walk up the street now and look any man in the face, or turn his back on him, just as he chose. The thought pleased him.

Years ago, a friend—an old friend of his youth, Harry Trelane, had asked him to come down to the country to visit him and meet his children and see the peach trees bloom. He had pleaded business, and his friend had asked him gravely why he kept on working so hard when he was already so well off. He wanted to be rich, he had replied.

"But you are already rich—you must be worth half a million? and you are a single man, with no children to leave it to."

"Yes, but I mean to be worth double that."

"Why?"

"Oh!—so that I can tell any man I choose to go to the d—-l," he had said half jestingly, being rather put to it by his friend's earnestness. His friend had laughed too, he remembered, but not heartily.

"Well, that is not much of a satisfaction after all," he had said; "the real satisfaction is in helping him the other

way;"—and this Livingstone remembered he had said very earnestly.

Livingstone now had reached this point of his aspiration —he could tell any man he chose "to go to the devil."

His content over this reflection was shadowed only by a momentary recollection that Henry Trelane was since dead. He regretted that his friend could not know of his success.

Another friend suddenly floated into his memory. Catherine Trelane was his college-mate's sister. Once she had been all the world to Livingstone, and he had found out afterwards that she had cared for him too, and would have married him had he spoken at one time. But he had not known this at first, and when he began to grow he could not bring himself to it. He could not afford to burden himself with a family that might interfere with his success. Then later, when he had succeeded and was well off and had asked Catherine Trelane to be his wife, she had declined. She said Livingstone had not offered her himself, but his fortune. It had stung Livingstone deeply, and he had awakened, but too late, to find for a while that he had really loved her. She was well off too, having been left a comfortable sum by a relative.

However, Livingstone was glad now, as he reflected on it, that it had turned out so. Catherine Trelane's refusal had really been the incentive which had spurred him on to greater success. It was to revenge himself that he had plunged deeper into business than ever, and he had bought his fine house to show that he could afford to live in style. He had intended then to marry; but he had not had time to do so; he had always been too busy.

Catherine Trelane, at least, was not dead. He had not heard of her in a long time; she had married, he knew, a man named—Shepherd, he believed, and he had heard that her husband was dead.

He would see that she knew he was worth—the page of figures suddenly flashed in before his eyes like a magic-lantern slide. Yes, he was worth all that! and he could now marry whom and when he pleased.

Chapter II

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Livingstone closed his books. He had put everything in such shape that Clark, his confidential clerk, would not have the least trouble this year in transferring everything and starting the new books that would now be necessary.

Last year Clark had been at his house a good many nights writing up these private books; but that was because Clark had been in a sort of muddle last winter,—his wife was sick, or one of his dozen children had met with an accident, —or something,—Livingstone vaguely remembered.

This year there would be no such trouble. Livingstone was pleased at the thought; for Clark was a good fellow, and a capable bookkeeper, even though he was a trifle slow.

Livingstone felt that he had, in a way, a high regard for Clark. He was attentive to his duties, beyond words. He was a gentleman, too,—of a first-rate family—a man of principle. How he could ever have been content to remain a simple clerk all these years, Livingstone could not understand. It gave him a certain contempt for him. That came, he reflected, of a man's marrying indiscreetly and having a houseful of children on his back.

Clark would be pleased at the showing on the books. He was always delighted when the balances showed a marked increase.

Livingstone was glad now that he had not only paid the old clerk extra for his night-work last year, but had given him fifty dollars additional, partly because of the trouble in

his family, and partly because Livingstone had been unusually irritated when Clark got the two accounts confused.

Livingstone prided himself on his manner to his employees. He prided himself on being a gentleman, and it was a mark of a gentleman always to treat subordinates with civility. He knew men in the city who were absolute bears to their employees; but they were blackguards.

He, perhaps, ought to have discharged Clark without a word; that would have been "business;" but really he ought not to have spoken to him as he did. Clark undoubtedly acted with dignity. Livingstone had had to apologize to him and ask him to remain, and had made the amend (to himself) by giving him fifty dollars extra for the ten nights' work. He could only justify the act now by reflecting that Clark had more than once suggested investments which had turned out most fortunately.

Livingstone determined to give Clark this year a hundred dollars—no, fifty—he must not spoil him, and it really was not "business."

The thought of his liberality brought to Livingstone's mind the donations that he always made at the close of the year. He might as well send off the cheques now.

He took from a locked drawer his private cheque-book and turned the stubs thoughtfully. He had had that cheque-book for a good many years. He used to give away a tenth of his income. His father before him used to do that. He remembered, with a smile, how large the sums used to seem to him. He turned back the stubs only to see how small a tenth used to be. He no longer gave a tenth or a

twentieth or even a—he had no difficulty in deciding the exact percentage he gave; for whenever he thought now of the sum he was worth, the figures themselves, in clean-cut lines, popped before his eyes. It was very curious. He could actually see them in his own handwriting. He rubbed his eyes, and the figures disappeared.

Well, he gave a good deal, anyhow—a good deal more than most men, he reflected. He looked at the later stubs and was gratified to find how large the amounts were,—they showed how rich he was,—and what a diversified list of charities he contributed to: hospitals, seminaries, asylums, churches, soup-kitchens, training schools of one kind or another. The stubs all bore the names of those through whom he contributed—they were mostly fashionable women of his acquaintance, who either for diversion or from real charity were interested in these institutions.

Mrs. Wright's name appeared oftenest. Mrs. Wright was a woman of fortune and very prominent, he reflected, but she was really kind; she was just a crank, and, somehow, she appeared really to believe in him. Her husband, Livingstone did not like: a cold, selfish man, who cared for nothing but money-making and his own family.

There was one name down on the book for a small amount which Livingstone could not recall.—Oh yes, he was an assistant preacher at Livingstone's church: the donation was for a Christmas-tree in a Children's Hospital, or something of the kind. This was one of Mrs. Wright's charities too. Livingstone remembered the note the preacher had written him afterwards—it had rather jarred on him, it was so grateful. He hated "gush," he said to himself;

he did not want to be bothered with details of yarn-gloves, flannel petticoats, and toys. He took out his pencil and wrote Mrs. Wright's name on the stub. That also should be charged to Mrs. Wright. He carried in his mind the total amount of the contributions, and as he came to the end a half-frown rested on his brow as he thought of having to give to all these objects again.

That was the trouble with charities,—they were as regular as coupons. Confound Mrs. Wright! Why did she not let him alone! However, she was an important woman—the leader in the best set in the city. Livingstone sat forward and began to fill out his cheques. Certain cheques he always filled out himself. He could not bear to let even Clark know what he gave to certain objects.

The thought of how commendable this was crossed his face and lit it up like a glint of transient sunshine. It vanished suddenly as he began to calculate, leaving the place where it had rested colder than before. He really could not spend as much this year as last—why, there was—for pictures, so much; charities, so much, etc. It would quite cut into the amount he had already decided to lay by. He must draw in somewhere: he was worth only—the line of figures slipped in before his eyes with its lantern-slide coldness.

He reflected. He must cut down on his charities. He could not reduce the sum for the General Hospital Fund; he had been giving to that a number of years.—Nor that for the asylum; Mrs. Wright was the president of that board, and had told him she counted on him.—Hang Mrs. Wright! It was positive blackmail!—Nor the pew-rent; that was respectable

—nor the Associated Charities; every one gave to that. He must cut out the smaller charities.

So he left off the Children's Hospital Christmas-tree Fund, and the soup-kitchen, and a few insignificant things like them into which he had been worried by Mrs. Wright and other troublesome women. The only regret he had was that taken together these sums did not amount to a great deal. To bring the saving up he came near cutting out the hospital. However, he decided not to do so. Mrs. Wright believed in him. He would leave out one of the pictures he had intended to buy; he would deny himself, and not cut out the big charity. This would save him the trouble of refusing Mrs. Wright and would also save him a good deal more money.

Once more, at the thought of his self-denial, that ray of wintry sunshine passed across Livingstone's cold face and gave it a look of distinction—almost like that of a marble statue.

Again he relapsed into reflection. His eyes were resting on the pane outside of which the fine snow was filling the chilly afternoon air in flurries and scurries that rose and fell and seemed to be blowing every way at once. But Livingstone's eyes were not on the snow. It had been so long since Livingstone had given a thought to the weather, except as it might affect the net earnings of railways in which he was interested, that he never knew what the weather was, and so far as he was concerned there need not have been any weather. Spring was to him but the season when certain work could be done which in time would yield a crop of dividends; and Autumn was but the

time when crops would be moved and stocks sent up or down.

So, though Livingstone's eyes rested on the pane, outside of which the flurrying snow was driving that meant so much to so many people, and his face was thoughtful—very thoughtful—he was not thinking of the snow, he was calculating profits.

Chapter III

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A noise in the outer office recalled Livingstone from his reverie. He aroused himself, almost with a start, and glanced at the gilt clock just above the stock-indicator. He had been so absorbed that he had quite forgotten that he had told the clerks to wait for him. He had had no idea that he had been at work so long. He reflected, however, that he had been writing charity-cheques: the clerks ought to appreciate the fact.

He touched a button, and the next second there was a gentle tap on the door, and Clark appeared. He was just the person to give just such a tap: a refined-looking, middle-aged, middle-sized man, with a face rather pale and a little worn; a high, calm forehead, above which the grizzled hair was almost gone; mild, blue eyes which beamed through black-rimmed glasses; a pleasant mouth which a drooping, colorless moustache only partly concealed, and a well-formed but slightly retreating chin. His figure was inclined to be stout, and his shoulders were slightly bent. He walked softly, and as he spoke his voice was gentle and pleasing. There was no assertion in it, but it was perfectly self-respecting. The eyes and voice redeemed the face from being commonplace.

"Oh!—Mr. Clark, I did not know I should have been so long about my work. I was so engaged getting my book straight for you, and writing—a few cheques for my annual contributions to hospitals, etc.,—that the time slipped by—"

The tone was unusually conciliatory for Livingstone; but he still retained it in addressing Clark. It was partly a remnant of his old time relation to Mr. Clark when he, yet a young man, first knew him, and partly a recognition of Clark's position as a man of good birth who had been unfortunate, and had a large family to support.

"Oh! that's all right, Mr. Livingstone," said the clerk, pleasantly.

He gathered up the letters on the desk and was unconsciously pressing them into exact order.

"Shall I have these mailed or sent by a messenger?"

"Mail them, of course," said Livingstone. "And Clark, I want you to—"

"I thought possibly that, as to-morrow is—" began the clerk in explanation, but stopped as Livingstone continued speaking without noticing the interruption.

—"I have been going over my matters," pursued Livingstone, "and they are in excellent shape—better this year than ever before—"

The clerk's face brightened.

"That's very good," said he, heartily. "I knew they were."

—"Yes, very good, indeed," said Livingstone condescendingly, pausing to dwell for a second on the sight of the line of pallid figures which suddenly flashed before his eyes. "And I have got everything straight for you this year; and I want you to come up to my house this evening and go over the books with me quietly, so that I can show you—"

"This evening?" The clerk's countenance fell and the words were as near an exclamation as he ever indulged in.

"Yes—, this evening. I shall be at home this evening and to-morrow evening—Why not this evening?" demanded Livingstone almost sharply.

"Why, only—that it's—. However,—" The speaker broke off. "I'll be there, sir. About eight-thirty, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Livingstone, curtly.

He was miffed, offended, aggrieved. He had intended to do a kind thing by this man, and he had met with a rebuff.

"I expect to pay you," he said, coldly.

The next second he knew he had made an error. A shocked expression came involuntarily over the other's face.

"Oh! it was not that!—It was—" He paused, reflected half a second. "I'll be there," he added, and, turning quickly, withdrew, leaving Livingstone feeling very blank and then, somewhat angry. He was angry with himself for making such a blunder, and then angrier with the clerk for leading him into it.

"That is the way with such people!" he reflected. "What is the use of being considerate and generous? No one appreciates it!"

The more he thought of it, the warmer he became. "Had he not taken Clark up ten—fifteen years ago, when he had not a cent in the world, and now he was getting fifteen hundred dollars a year—yes, sixteen hundred, and almost owned his house; and he had made every cent for him!"

At length, Livingstone's sense of injury became so strong, he could stand it no longer. He determined to have a talk with Clark.

He opened the door and walked into the outer office. One of the younger clerks was just buttoning up his overcoat.