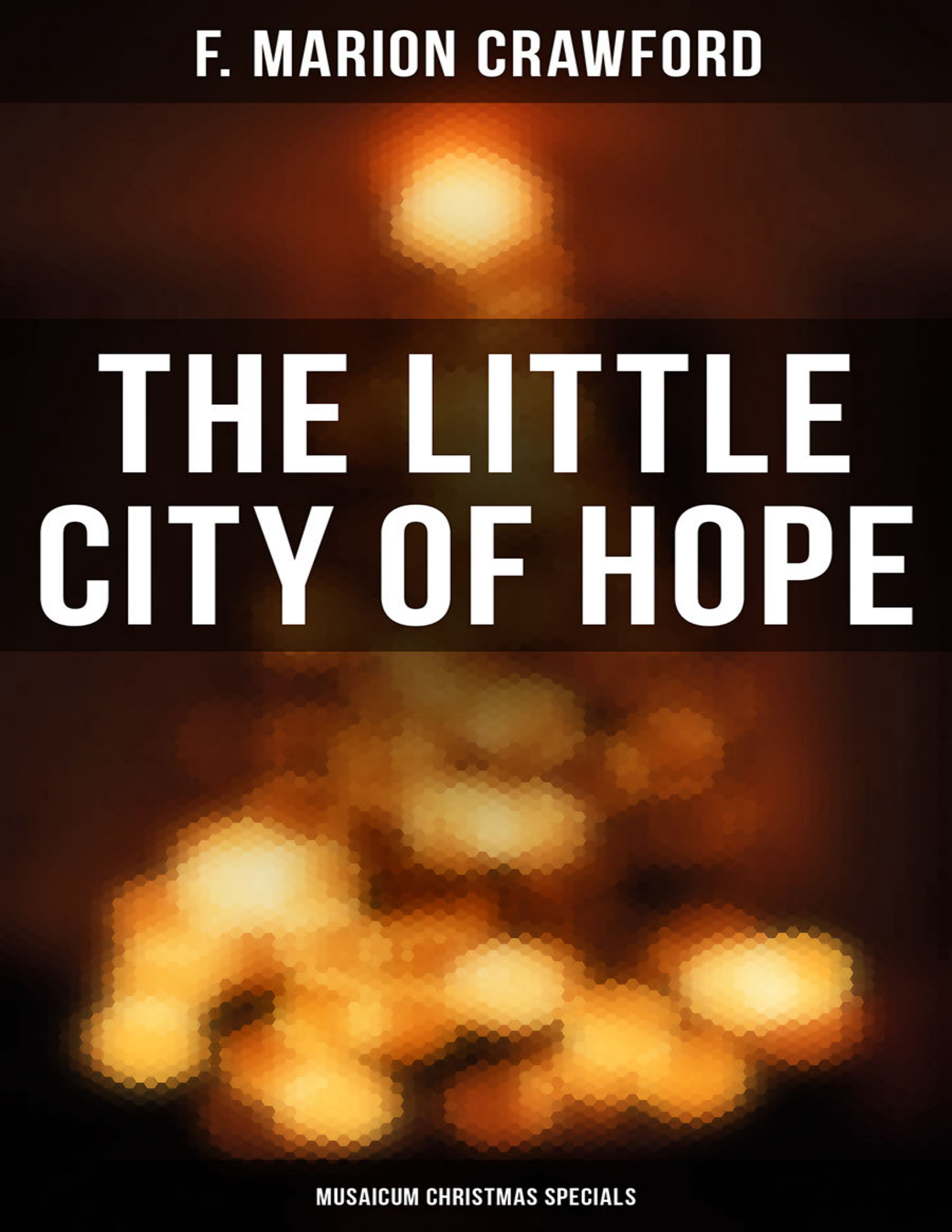
F. MARION CRAWFORD

THE LITTLE CITY OF HOPE



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F. Marion Crawford

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Table of Contents

I
HOW JOHN HENRY OVERHOLT SAT ON PANDORA'S BOX

Table of Contents

"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 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 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.

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 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 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 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 locomotive 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 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