

The Story Page

Peter Crawford's Partner.

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I noticed in the paper the other day the death of Peter Crawford, of the firm of Crawford and Co., iron merchants, of John street; and among the news items of a later issue I read that Peter Crawford had left all his money to a rich nephew to do as he pleased with it, and that the nephew intended dividing it among various deserving charities.

Twenty years ago I had exceptional opportunities for observing Peter Crawford, as for a long time Frank Aldrich, the man in whose employ I worked, had desk room in the house of Crawford & Co.

Peter was as hard as the iron he sold. Anyone on John street would have told you that. He would have told you so himself. He used to eat luncheon at Farrish's chop-house and always sat by himself in the corner with his back to the rest of the customers. And Mr. Farrish's head bar-keeper would point him out to those who came in, and go through a pantomimic action expressive of head-punching. It would have edified the old man if he could have known this, for he gloried in his hardness and was pleased at his unpopularity. Not but that he had friends, but they were, in the main, men in other lines of trade.

When I went to work for Frank Aldrich I thought Peter Crawford the hardest and the most unpleasant man I had ever seen. The very morning I began work he stopped at my desk and asked me my name in a rasping, high-pitched voice that went with his dried-leaf complexion and drumhead skin.

'Alden Adams, sir,' said I.

'Well, I suppose you'll fritter away Mr. Aldrich's time. They all do. How much do you get?'

'Two dollars a week.'

'Well, it's more than any boys worth. I worked for a year just to learn the business, and glad of a chance. To-day boys are paid for doing nothing, and they don't learn anything.'

'Well, I'm glad I don't have to work for you,' said I to myself as he passed on.

That afternoon or the next, as I sat at my desk addressing envelopes, a pale-looking woman came down the aisle and asked me where Mr. Crawford's office was. I told her and she went on.

'Well, what do you want?' said Crawford's rasping, querulous voice.

'I'm Mrs. Seymour. My husband used to work for you.'

'What, John Seymour? Wasn't worth his salt, I discharged him.'

'Yes, sir, but he's just been run over by a horse-car and he'll be unable to work for several weeks—'

'Never was able to work.'

Oh, how my blood boiled at his unfeeling remarks.

'Yes, sir,' said the woman; but I thought that maybe you could find something for me to do so as to make a little money—'

'Never knew a woman yet who could do anything worth paying for. I wonder why you came here to pester me.'

'Well Sir, John told me you were not—'

'Not sympathetic. Well, he told you right. If John had been minding his business he would not have been run over. I can't do anything for you, but if you want you can write to my partner. Here's his address. I believe he saw some good in John when he was here, but I didn't. If he's fool enough to help you, all right. Now, do go along, and don't bother me.'

The woman came out crying, and I remember wishing I had been paid so that I might show her that everyone was not as hard as Peter Crawford, but all I had was a cent for my ferrage—I lived in Brooklyn—and I could do nothing.

Later in the week I was talking about Crawford's hardness to Jimmy Egan, the shipping clerk, and he said:

'I guess his partner must have fixed John up all right, for Mrs. Seymour's got a job at dress-making, and when I went to see John at the hospital he'd a bunch of flowers from Schutt.'

The shipping clerk's eyes twinkled as he said

this, but though I noticed the twinkle I couldn't see the occasion for it, and ascribed it to nervousness. Twitching noses and lips and twinkling eyes are sometimes forms of St. Vitus dance.

Mr. Crawford's partner, G. W. Schutt, never came to the office. I was on the premises for six months and I never saw him, but I knew that the firm had Western connections, and I understood that he represented the house at Pittsburg.

Christmas came along a month or so after I began to work for Aldrich, and the day before that holiday Crawford said to the cashier in a voice that pierced the remotest part of the store:

'I understand that old man Doane is giving away turkeys to his clerks. Doane is a blame fool. The men won't work a bit better for him because of his doing it. When I was a boy I had to work for all I got, and there was no such thing as Christmas in the town where I came from, up in Maine. If I pay a man what he's worth, anything over that is charity and tends to pauperize him.'

His exit from the store was the cue for a chorus of groans, in which I joined with heartiness on general principles. Of course I had nothing to say either way. Mr. Aldrich had already given me a crisp two-dollar-bill for my Christmas, so I was happy, but I did feel sorry for Crawford's men, and I told his new office boy that he was the meanest man on John street.

'Meanest man in the iron business,' said he.

About five o'clock there came a telegram from Pittsburg signed 'G. W. Schutt,' and addressed to the cashier. He read it and then came to the door of the counting room and said:

'Hurrah, boys; it's a good thing there's a partner in this concern.' Mr. Schutt tells me to give you all one per cent. of your salaries as a Christmas present.'

I looked over at the shipping clerk at that moment, and again his eyes were twinkling; but for me I felt a little downhearted. I was sorry I did not belong to the house of Crawford & Co. The telegram had called for gold, and strange to say, the cashier had a good supply of it. He called all the office staff in, and they came back, some with eagles, some with half-eagles and two with double eagles. Several stopped at my desk and showed me their bright coins and my heart felt like lead.

In a few minutes the cashier came out and said, Alden, Mr. Aldrich says I may send you around to King & Cumberland's on an errand, as Tom is busy, and Mr. Crawford's partner wanted me to give you this for your Christmas.'

He handed me a gold dollar, the first I had ever seen. I thanked him and went on that errand with my feet very light indeed. How in the world had Mr. Schutt ever heard of me? How different a man from that old curmudgeon, Crawford!

When I came back I stopped at the shipping clerk's desk. He was a sympathetic young Irishman and the friendliest man in the place, and I wanted to tell him of my good fortune.

'Isn't Mr. Schutt a jim dandy?'

'Yes,' said he, and again the eyes twinkled. 'It's a wonder he'd never come here to be thanked. Did y' ever see his photograph?'

'No,' said I.

'Neither did I, but I think he's the living image of Mr. Crawford.'

Now, this struck me at the time and often after as being inconsequent and entirely illogical, but I never remembered to ask him what he meant.

Among the office force there was a black-haired, dreamy-eyed boy from some place on Cape Cod. We called him the artist and used to make fun of him because he was always seeing beauty in things that looked desperately commonplace to us.

He was a faithful fellow, but he always spent his noon hours drawing, and at last Mr. Pulsifer, the pump man next door, who was something of an art-lover, told him that he ought to study abroad.

'You'll never make your mark in the iron business, and you may do a good deal as an artist. You go and tell Mr. Crawford how it is, or get your mother to go.'

Now, Story—his name was Waldo Story—was, as I have said, a dreamy sort of chap, and it had

never occurred to him that Crawford was a hard man so what did he do but go home and tell his mother what Pulsifer had said, and the next day she came down to speak to the old man.

He sat with his hat on all through the interview. I know, for I saw him through the open door. You could not say that Peter Crawford's manners were irreproachable.

'Well, what is it? Whose leg is broken now? When did he work for me?'

There was silence for a moment, and then Mrs. Story said:

'I don't understand you, sir. I'm Waldo's mother.'

'And who in thunder is Waldo?'

'Why, Waldo is your clerk,' said she as proudly as if she had said he was the redoubtable partner himself.

'Oh, the boy in a dream all the while. Well, what did he fall through? How long will he be laid up? Why didn't he use his eyes?'

'Waldo, hasn't had anything happen to him, but he wants to go to Paris to study art.'

Mrs. Story plumped the words out more quickly than she had intended, I dare say, and they plainly staggered Mr. Crawford.

'Oh, he does, does he?' said he, raising his already high voice, as he always did when he was losing his temper.

'Yes, sir.'

'Mrs. Waldo, or whatever your name is, do you suppose that I went into the iron business so that I could keep people in hospitals, and art schools, and other places, and do my own word myself? Aren't there enough artists and other incapables without deliberately going to work to make one? What earthly good is an artist? I never bought a picture in my life. Iron's some use. I can see a profit in iron, but do you suppose there's any profit in pictures? A man buys a picture and his money's gone, and all he has is a lot of paint smeared on a board. That's all a picture is. Now if Waldo stays here he may become a respectable member of society an iron merchant, but if he becomes an artist he'll go to the duce and be an object of charity all his days. And you want me to help him on the road to perdition?'

He paused, and Mrs. Story said with dignity, Mr. Crawford, I had no idea I should hear anything like this or I should not have come. I thought that if you cared for pictures you might help him along and he'd repay you when he got a name. He is said to have great talent.'

'Well, you've come to the wrong shop. If my partner was here he might do something, for Waldo is a good boy, but I have no use for artists. They are fifth wheels, incumbrances, utter no-good. Here this is Mr. Schutt's address. If you want to, write to him. He may do something. Out in Pittsburg they go in for art, but I'm dead against the whole theory of paying a man for fooling away precious time.'

He turned to his desk and she came out, crumpling up the paper in her hand and her eyes full of tears. As she passed my desk I rose to go out to the shipping clerk, and I said to her, 'You'd better write to Mr. Schutt. He'll help Waldo.'

She evidently took my advice, for about a fortnight later Waldo came to the store with the happiest look I had ever seen on his melancholy face.

'Mr. Schutt is a brick,' said he, and then he told us that Mr. Schutt had seen his work and had showed it to some Pittsburg people connected with the art gallery there, and that he was to go to Paris to study art, and that he was to give Mr. Schutt an option on any pictures he might paint during the next ten years.

'I'm glad to leave Crawford. My mother says he was almost insulting.'

Although I have changed his name, those who follow art matters will have no difficulty in recognizing Waldo's story. He certainly did have rare talent, and he applied himself diligently and exhibited in the salon ten years or more ago, and afterward came to New York to live, but he never could overcome his aversion to the man who might have helped him but who didn't.