

The \$25,000 Jaw

Richard Connell

“Rather thirsty this morning, eh, Mr. Addicks?” inquired Cowdin, the chief purchasing agent. The “Mister” was said with a long, hissing “s” and was distinctly not meant as a title of respect.

Cowdin, as he spoke, rested his two square hairy hands on Croly Addicks’ desk, and this enabled him to lean forward and thrust his well-razored knob of blue-black jaw within a few inches of Croly Addicks’ face.

“Too bad, Mr. Addicks, too bad,” said Cowdin in a high, sharp voice. “Do you realize, Mr. Addicks, that every time you go up to the water cooler you waste fifteen seconds of the firm’s time? I might use a stronger word than ‘waste,’ but I’ll spare your delicate feelings. Do you think you can control your thirst until you take your lunch at the Waldorf-Astoria, or shall I have your desk piped with ice water, Mr. Addicks?”

Croly Addicks drew his convex face as far away as he could from the concave features of the chief purchasing agent and muttered, “Had kippered herring for breakfast.”

A couple of the stenographers tittered. Croly’s ears reddened and his hands played nervously with his blue-and-white polka-dot necktie. Cowdin eyed him for a contemptuous half second, then rotated on his rubber heel and prowled back to his big desk in the corner of the room.

Croly Addicks, inwardly full of red revolution, outwardly merely flustered and intimidated, rustled among the piles of invoices and forms on his desk, and tried desperately to concentrate on his task as assistant to the assistant purchasing agent of the Pierian Piano Company, a vast far-flung enterprise that boasted, with only slight exaggeration, “We bring melody to a million homes.” He hated Cowdin at all times, and particularly when he called him “Mr. Addicks.” That “Mister” hurt worse than a slap on a sunburned shoulder. What made the hate almost beyond bearing was the realization on Croly’s part that it was impotent.

“Gawsh,” murmured the blond stenographer from the corner of her mouth, after the manner of convicts, “Old Grizzly’s pickin’ on the chinless wonder again. I don’t see how Croly stands it. I wouldn’t if I was him.”

“Aw, wadda yuh expeck of Chinless?” returned the brunette stenographer disdainfully as she crackled paper to conceal her breach of the office rules against conversation. “Feller with ingrown jaws was made to pick on.”

At noon Croly went out to his lunch, not to the big hotel, as Cowdin had suggested, but to a

crowded basement full of the jangle and clatter of cutlery and crockery, and the smell and sputter of frying liver. The name of this cave was the Help Yourself Buffet. Its habitués, mostly clerks like Croly, pronounced “buffet” to rhyme with “rough it,” which was incorrect but apt.

The place was, as its patrons never tired of reminding one another as they tried with practiced eye and hand to capture the largest sandwiches, a conscience beanery. As a matter of fact, one’s conscience had a string tied to it by a cynical management.

The system is simple. There are piles of food everywhere, with prominent price tags. The hungry patron seizes and devours what he wishes. He then passes down a runway and reports, to the best of his mathematical and ethical ability, the amount his meal has cost—usually, for reasons unknown, forty-five cents. The report is made to a small automaton of a boy, with a blasé eye and a brassy voice. He hands the patron a ticket marked 45 and at the same instant screams in a sirenic and incredulous voice, “Fawty-fi’.” Then the patron passes on down the alley and pays the cashier at the exit. The purpose of the boy’s violent outcry is to signal the spotter, who roves among the foods, a derby hat cocked over one eye and an untasted sandwich in his hand, so that persons deficient in conscience may not basely report their total as forty-five when actually they have eaten ninety cents’ worth.

On this day, when Croly Addicks had finished his modest lunch, the spotter was lurking near the exit. Several husky-looking young men passed him, and brazenly reported totals of twenty cents, when it was obvious that persons of their brawn would not be content with a lunch costing less than seventy-five; but the spotter noting their bull necks and bellicose air let them pass. But when Croly approached the desk and reported forty-five the spotter pounced on him. Experience had taught the spotter the type of man one may pounce on without fear of sharp words or resentful blows.

“Pahdun me a minute, frien’,” said the spotter. “Ain’t you made a little mistake?”

“Me?” quavered Croly. He was startled and he looked guilty, as only the innocent can look.

“Yes, you,” said the spotter, scowling at the weak outlines of Croly’s countenance.

“No,” jerked out Croly. “Forty-five’s correct.” He tried to move along toward the cashier, but the spotter’s bulk blocked the exit alley.

“Ain’t you the guy I seen layin’ away a double portion of strawb’ry shortcake wit’ cream?” asked the spotter sternly.

Croly hoped that it was not apparent that his upper lip was trembling; his hands went up to his polka-dot tie and fidgeted with it. He had paused yearningly over the strawberry shortcake; but he had decided he couldn’t afford it.

“Didn’t have shortcake,” he said huskily.

“Oh, no!” rejoined the spotter sarcastically, appealing to the ring of interested faces that had now crowded about. “I s’pose that white stuff on your upper lip ain’t whipped cream?”

“It’s milk,” mumbled Croly. “All I had was milk and oatmeal crackers and apple pie. Honest.”

The spotter snorted dubiously.

“Some guy,” he declared loudly, “tucked away a double order of strawb’ry shortcake and a hamboiger steak, and it wasn’t me. So come awn, young feller, you owe the house ninety cents, so cut out the arggament.”

“I—I—” began Croly, incoherently rebellious; but it was clear that the crowd believed him guilty of the conscienceless swindle; so he quailed before the spotter’s accusing eye, and said, “Oh, well, have it your own way. You got me wrong, but I guess you have to pick on little fellows to keep your job.” He handed over ninety cents to the cashier.

“You’ll never see my face in this dump again,” muttered Croly savagely over his shoulder.

“That won’t make me bust out cryin’, Chinless,” called the spotter derisively.

Croly stumbled up the steps, his eyes moist, his heart pumping fast. Chinless! The old epithet. The old curse. It blistered his soul.

Moodily he sought out a bench in Madison Square, hunched himself down and considered his case. To-day, he felt, was the critical day of his life; it was his thirtieth birthday.

His mind flashed back, as you’ve seen it done in the movies, to a scene the night before, in which he had had a leading rôle.

“Emily,” he had said to the loveliest girl in the world, “will you marry me?”

Plainly Emily Mackie had expected something of the sort, and after the fashion of the modern business girl had given the question calm and clear-visioned consideration.

“Croly,” she said softly, “I like you. You are a true friend. You are kind and honest and you work hard. But oh, Croly dear, we couldn’t live on twenty-two dollars and fifty cents a week; now could we?”

That was Croly's present salary after eleven years with the Pierian Piano Company, and he had to admit that Emily was right; they could not live on it.

"But, dearest Emily," he argued, "to-morrow they appoint a new assistant purchasing agent, and I'm in line for the job. It pays fifty a week."

"But are you sure you'll get it?"

His face fell.

"N-no," he admitted, "but I deserve it. I know the job about ten times better than any of the others, and I've been there longest."

"You thought they'd promote you last year, you know," she reminded him.

"And so they should have," he replied, flushing. "If it hadn't been for old Grizzly Cowdin! He thinks I couldn't make good because I haven't one of those underslung jaws like his."

"He's a brute!" cried Emily. "You know more about the piano business than he does."

"I think I do," said Croly, "but he doesn't. And he's the boss."

"Oh, Croly, if you'd only assert yourself——"

"I guess I never learned how," said Croly sadly.

As he sat there on the park bench, plagued by the demon of introspection, he had to admit that he was not the pugnacious type, the go-getter sort that Cowdin spoke of often and admiringly. He knew his job; he could say that of himself in all fairness, for he had spent many a night studying it; some day, he told himself, they'd be surprised, the big chiefs and all of them, to find out how much he did know about the piano business. But would they ever find out?

Nobody, reflected Croly, ever listened when he talked. There was nothing about him that carried conviction. It had always been like that since his very first day in school when the boys had jeeringly noted his rather marked resemblance to a haddock, and had called out, "Chinless, Chinless, stop tryin' to swallow your face."

Around his chinlessness his character had developed; no one had ever taken him seriously, so quite naturally he found it hard to take himself seriously. It was inevitable that his character should become as chinless as his face.

His apprenticeship under the thumb and chin of the domineering Cowdin had not tended to decrease his youthful timidity. Cowdin, with a jut of jaw like a paving block, had bullied Croly for years. More than once Croly had yearned burningly to plant his fist squarely on that blue-black prong of chin, and he had even practiced up on a secondhand punching bag with this end in view. But always he weakened at the crucial instant. He let his resentment escape through the safety valve of intense application to the business of his firm. It comforted him somewhat to think that even the big-jawed president, Mr. Flagstead, probably didn't have a better grasp of the business as a whole than he, chinless Croly Addicks, assistant to the assistant purchasing agent. But—and he groaned aloud at the thought—his light was hidden under a bushel of chinlessness.

Someone had left a crumpled morning edition of an evening paper on the bench, and Croly glanced idly at it. From out the pages stared the determined incisive features of a young man very liberally endowed with jaw. Enviously Croly read the caption beneath the picture, "The fighting face of Kid McNulty, the Chelsea Bearcat, who boxes Leonard." With a sigh Croly tossed the paper away.

He glanced up at the Metropolitan Tower clock and decided that he had just time enough for a cooling beaker of soda. He reached the soda fountain just ahead of three other thirsty men. By every right he should have been served first. But the clerk, a lofty youth with the air of a grand duke, after one swift appraising glance at the place where Croly's chin should have been, disregarded the murmured "Pineapple phosphate, please," and turned to serve the others. Of them he inquired solicitously enough, "What's yourn?" But when he came to Croly he shot him an impatient look and asked sharply, "Well, speak up, can't yuh?" The cool drink turned to galling acid as Croly drank it.

He sprinted for his office, trying to cling to a glimmering hope that Cowdin, despite his waspishness of the morning, had given him the promotion. He reached his desk a minute late.

Cowdin prowled past and remarked with a cutting geniality, harder to bear than a curse, "Well, Mr. Addicks, you dallied too long over your lobster and quail, didn't you?"

Under his desk Croly's fists knotted tightly. He made no reply. To-morrow, probably, he'd have an office of his own, and be almost free from Cowdin's ill-natured raillery. At this thought he bent almost cheerfully over his stack of work.

A girl rustled by and thumb-tacked a small notice on the bulletin board. Croly's heart ascended to a point immediately below his Adam's apple and stuck there, for the girl was Cowdin's secretary, and Croly knew what announcement that notice contained. He knew it was against the Spartan code of office etiquette to consult the board during working hours, but he thought of Emily, and what the announcement meant to him, and he rose and with

quick steps crossed the room and read the notice.

Ellis G. Baldwin has this day been promoted to assistant purchasing agent.

(Signed) *Samuel Cowdin C. P. A.*

Croly Addicks had to steady himself against the board; the black letters on the white card jiggled before his eyes; his stomach felt cold and empty. Baldwin promoted over his head! Blatant Baldwin, who was never sure of his facts, but was always sure of himself. Cocksure incompetent Baldwin! But—but—he had a bulldog jaw.

Croly Addicks, feeling old and broken, turned around slowly, to find Cowdin standing behind him, a wry smile on his lips, his pin-point eyes fastened on Croly's stricken face.

"Well, Mr. Addicks," purred the chief purchasing agent, "are you thinking of going out for a spin in your limousine or do you intend to favor us with a little work to-day?" He tilted his jaw toward Croly.

"I—I thought I was to get that job," began Croly Addicks, fingering his necktie.

Cowdin produced a rasping sound by rubbing his chin with his finger.

"Oh, did you, indeed?" he asked. "And what made you think that, Mr. Addicks?"

"I've been here longest," faltered Croly, "and I want to get married, and I know the job best, and I've been doing the work ever since Sebring quit, Mr. Cowdin."

For a long time Cowdin did not reply, but stood rubbing his chin and smiling pityingly at Croly Addicks, until Croly, his nerves tense, wanted to scream. Then Cowdin measuring his words spoke loud enough for the others in the room to hear.

"Mr. Addicks," he said, "that job needs a man with a punch. And you haven't a punch, Mr. Addicks. Mr. Addicks, that job requires a fighter. And you're not a fighter, Mr. Addicks. Mr. Addicks, that job requires a man with a jaw on him. And you haven't any jaw on you, Mr. Addicks. Get me?" He thrust out his own peninsula of chin.

It was then that Croly Addicks erupted like a long suppressed volcano. All the hate of eleven bullied years was concentrated in his knotted hand as he swung it swishingly from his hip

and landed it flush on the outpointing chin.

An ox might have withstood that punch, but Cowdin was no ox. He rolled among the waste-paper baskets. Snorting furiously he scrambled to his feet and made a bull-like rush at Croly. Trembling in every nerve Croly Addicks swung at the blue-black mark again, and Cowdin reeled against a desk. As he fell his thick fingers closed on a cast-iron paperweight that lay on the desk.

Croly Addicks had a blurred split-second vision of something black shooting straight at his face; then he felt a sharp brain-jarring shock; then utter darkness.

When the light came back to him again it was in Bellevue Hospital. His face felt queer, numb and enormous; he raised his hand feebly to it; it appeared to be covered with concrete bandages.

“Don’t touch it,” cautioned the nurse. “It’s in a cast, and is setting.”

It took long weeks for it to set; they were black weeks for Croly, brightened only by a visit or two from Emily Mackie. At last the nurse removed the final bandage and he was discharged from the hospital.

Outside the hospital gate Croly paused in the sunlight. Not many blocks away he saw the shimmer of the East River, and he faced toward it. He could bury his catastrophe there, and forget his smashed-up life, his lost job and his shattered chances of ever marrying. Who would have him now? At best it meant the long weary climb up from the very bottom, and he was past thirty. He took a half step in the direction of the river. He stopped; he felt a hand plucking timidly at his coat sleeve.

The person who plucked at his sleeve was a limp youth with a limp cigarette and vociferous checked clothes and cap. There was no mistaking the awe in his tone as he spoke.

“Say,” said the limp youth, “ain’t you Kid McNulty, de Chelsea Bearcat?”

He? Croly Addicks? Taken for Kid McNulty, the prize fighter? A wave of pleasure swept over the despondent Croly. Life seemed suddenly worth living. He had been mistaken for a prize fighter!

He hardened his voice.

“That’s me,” he said.

“Gee,” said the limp youth, “I seen yuh box Leonard. Gee, that was a battle! Say, next time yuh meet him you’ll knock him for a row of circus tents, won’t yuh?”

“I’ll knock him for a row of aquariums,” promised Croly. And he jauntily faced about and strolled away from the river and toward Madison Square, followed by the admiring glances of the limp youth.

He felt the need of refreshment and pushed into a familiar soda shop. The same lofty grand duke was on duty behind the marble counter, and was taking advantage of a lull by imparting a high polish to his finger nails, and consequently he did not observe the unobtrusive entrance of Croly Addicks.

Croly tapped timidly with his dime on the counter; the grand duke looked up.

“Pineapple phosphate, please,” said Croly in a voice still weak from his hospital days.

The grand duke shot from his reclining position as if attached to a spring.

“Yessir, yessir, right away,” he smiled, and hustled about his task.

Shortly he placed the beverage before the surprised Croly.

“Is it all right? Want a little more sirup?” inquired the grand duke anxiously.

Croly, almost bewildered by this change of demeanor, raised the glass to his lips. As he did so he saw the reflection of a face in the glistening mirror opposite. He winced, and set down the glass, untasted.

He stared, fascinated, overwhelmed; it must surely be his face, since his body was attached to it, but how could it be? The eyes were the mild blue eyes of Croly Addicks, but the face was the face of a stranger—and a startling-looking stranger, at that!

Croly knew of course that it had been necessary to rebuild his face, shattered by the missile hurled by Cowdin, but in the hospital they had kept mirrors from him, and he had discovered, but only by sense of touch, that his countenance had been considerably altered. But he had never dreamed that the transformation would be so radical.

In the clear light he contemplated himself, and understood why he had been mistaken for the Chelsea Bearcat. Kid McNulty had a large amount of jaw, but he never had a jaw like the stranger with Croly Addicks’ eyes who stared back, horrified, at Croly from the soda-fountain mirror. The plastic surgeons had done their work well; there was scarcely any scar.

But they had built from Croly's crushed bones a chin that protruded like the prow of a battleship.

The mariners of mythology whom the sorceress changed into pigs could hardly have been more perplexed and alarmed than Croly Addicks. He had, in his thirty years, grown accustomed to his meek apologetic face. The face that looked back at him was not meek or apologetic. It was distinctly a hard face; it was a determined, forbidding face; it was almost sinister.

Croly had the uncanny sensation of having had his soul slipped into the body of another man, an utter stranger. Inside he was the same timorous young assistant to the assistant purchasing agent—out of work; outside he was a fearsome being, a dangerous-looking man, who made autocratic soda dispensers jump.

To him came a sinking, lost feeling; a cold emptiness; the feeling of a gentle Doctor Jekyll who wakes to find himself in the shell of a fierce Mr. Hyde. For a second or two Croly Addicks regretted that he had not gone on to the river.

The voice of the soda clerk brought him back to the world.

"If your drink isn't the way you like it, sir," said the grand duke amiably, "just say the word and I'll mix you up another."

Croly started up.

"Sall right," he murmured, and fumbled his way out to Madison Square.

He decided to live a while longer, face and all. It was something to be deferred to by soda clerks.

He sank down on a bench and considered what he should do. At the twitter of familiar voices he looked up and saw the blond stenographer and the brunette stenographer from his former company passing on the way to lunch.

He rose, advanced a step toward them, tipped his hat and said, "Hello."

The blond stenographer drew herself up regally, as she had seen some one do in the movies, and chilled Croly with an icy stare.

"Don't get so fresh!" she said coldly. "To whom do you think you're speaking to?"

"You gotta crust," observed the brunette, outdoing her companion in crushing hauteur.

“Just take yourself and your baby scarer away, Mister Masher, and get yourself a job posing for animal crackers.”

They swept on as majestically as tight skirts and French heels would permit, and Croly, confused, subsided back on his bench again. Into his brain, buzzing now from the impact of so many new sensations, came a still stronger impression that he was not Croly Addicks at all, but an entirely different and fresh-born being, unrecognized by his old associates. He pondered on the trick fate had played on him until hunger beckoned him to the Help Yourself Buffet. He was inside before he realized what he was doing, and before he recalled his vow never to enter there again. The same spotter was moving in and out among the patrons, the same derby cocked over one eye, and an untasted sandwich, doubtless the same one, in his hand. He paid no special heed to the renovated Croly Addicks.

Croly was hungry and under the spotter's very nose he helped himself to hamburger steak and a double order of strawberry shortcake with thick cream. Satisfied, he started toward the blasé check boy with the brassy voice; as he went his hand felt casually in his change pocket, and he stopped short, gripped by horror. The coins he counted there amounted to exactly forty-five cents and his meal totaled a dollar at least. Furthermore, that was his last cent in the world. He cast a quick frightened glance around him. The spotter was lounging against the check desk, and his beady eye seemed focused on Croly Addicks. Croly knew that his only chance lay in bluffing; he drew in a deep breath, thrust forward his new chin, and said to the boy, “Forty-five.” “Fawty-fi,” screamed the boy. The spotter pricked up his ears.

“Pahdun me a minute, frien’,” said the spotter. “Ain’t you made a little mistake?”

Summoning every ounce of nerve he could Croly looked straight back into the spotter's eyes.

“No,” said Croly loudly.

For the briefest part of a second the spotter wavered between duty and discretion. Then the beady eyes dropped and he murmured, “Oh, I beg pahdun. I thought you was the guy that just got outside of a raft of strawb’ry shortcake and hamboiger. Guess I made a little mistake myself.”

With the brisk firm step of a conqueror Croly Addicks strode into the air, away from the scene he had once left so humiliated.

Again, for many reflective minutes he occupied one of those chairs of philosophy, a park bench, and revolved in his mind the problem, “Where do I go from here?” The vacuum in his pockets warned him that his need of a job was imperative. Suddenly he released his

thoughtful clutch on his new jaw, and his eyes brightened and his spine straightened with a startling idea that at once fascinated and frightened him. He would try to get his old job back again.

Inside him the old shrinking Croly fought it out with the new Croly.

“Don’t be foolish!” bleated the old Croly. “You haven’t the nerve to face Cowdin again.”

“Buck up!” argued back the new Croly. “You made that soda clerk hop, and that spotter quail. The worst Cowdin can say is ‘No!’ ”

“You haven’t a chance in the piano company, anyhow,” demurred the old Croly. “They know you too well; your old reputation is against you. The spineless jellyfish class at twenty-two-fifty per is your limit there.”

“Nonsense,” declared the new Croly masterfully. “It’s the one job you know. Ten to one they need you this minute. You’ve invested eleven years of training in it. Make that experience count.”

“But—but Cowdin may take a wallop at me,” protested the old Croly.

“Not while you have a face like Kid McNulty, the Chelsea Bearcat,” flashed back the new Croly. The new Croly won.

Ten minutes later Samuel Cowdin swiveled round in his chair to face a young man with a pale, grim face and an oversized jaw.

“Well?” demanded Cowdin.

“Mr. Cowdin,” said Croly Addicks, holding his tremors in check by a great effort of will, “I understand you need a man in the purchasing department. I want the job.”

Cowdin shot him a puzzled look. The chief purchasing agent’s countenance wore the expression of one who says “Where have I seen that face before?”

“We do need a man,” Cowdin admitted, staring hard at Croly, “though I don’t know how you knew it. Who are you?”

“I’m Addicks,” said Croly, thrusting out his new chin.

Cowdin started. His brow wrinkled in perplexity; he stared even more intently at the firm-visaged man, and then shook his head as if giving up a problem.

“That’s odd,” he muttered, reminiscently stroking his chin. “There was a young fellow by that name here. Croly was his first name. You’re not related to him, I suppose?”

Croly, the unrecognized, straightened up in his chair as if he had sat on a hornet. With difficulty he gained control over his breathing, and managed to growl, “No, I’m not related to him.”

Cowdin obviously was relieved.

“Didn’t think you were,” he remarked, almost amiably. “You’re not the same type of man at all.”

“Do I get that job?” asked Croly. In his own ears his voice sounded hard.

“What experience have you had?” questioned Cowdin briskly.

“Eleven years,” replied Croly.

“With what company?”

“With this company,” answered Croly evenly.

“With this company?” Cowdin’s voice jumped a full octave higher to an incredulous treble.

“Yes,” said Croly. “You asked me if I was related to Croly Addicks. I said ‘No.’ That’s true. I’m not related to him—because I am Croly Addicks.”

With a gasp of alarm Cowdin jumped to his feet and prepared to defend himself from instant onslaught.

“The devil you are!” he cried.

“Sit down, please,” said Croly, quietly.

Cowdin in a daze sank back into his chair and sat staring, hypnotized, at the man opposite him as one might stare who found a young pink elephant in his bed.

“I’ll forget what happened if you will,” said Croly. “Let’s talk about the future. Do I get the job?”

“Eh? What’s that?” Cowdin began to realize that he was not dreaming.

“Do I get the job?” Croly repeated.

A measure of his accustomed self-possession had returned to the chief purchasing agent and he answered with as much of his old manner as he could muster, “I’ll give you another chance if you think you can behave yourself.”

“Thanks,” said Croly, and inside his new self sniggered at his old self.

The chief purchasing agent was master of himself by now, and he rapped out in the voice that Croly knew only too well, “Get right to work. Same desk. Same salary. And remember, no more monkey business, Mr. Addicks, because if—”

He stopped short. There was something in the face of Croly Addicks that told him to stop. The big new jaw was pointing straight at him as if it were a pistol.

“You said, just now,” said Croly, and his voice was hoarse, “that I wasn’t the same type of man as the Croly Addicks who worked here before. I’m not. I’m no longer the sort of man it’s safe to ride. Please don’t call me Mister unless you mean it.”

Cowdin’s eyes strayed from the snapping eyes of Croly Addicks to the taut jaw; he shrugged his shoulders.

“Report to Baldwin,” was all he said.

As Croly turned away, his back hid from Cowdin the smile that had come to his new face.

The reincarnated Croly had been back at his old job for ten days, or, more accurately, ten days and nights, for it had taken that long to straighten out the snarl in which Baldwin, not quite so sure of himself now, had been immersed to the eyebrows. Baldwin was watching, a species of awe in his eye, while Croly swiftly and expertly checked off a complicated price list. Croly looked up.

“Baldwin,” he said, laying down the work, “I’m going to make a suggestion to you. It’s for your own good.”

“Shoot!” said the assistant purchasing agent warily.

“You’re not cut out for this game,” said Croly Addicks.

“Wha-a-at?” sputtered Baldwin.

Croly leveled his chin at him. Baldwin listened as the new Addicks continued: "You're not the buying type, Baldwin. You're the selling type. Take my advice and get transferred to the selling end. You'll be happier—and you'll get farther."

"Say," began Baldwin truculently, "you've got a nerve. I've a good notion to——"

Abruptly he stopped. Croly's chin was set at an ominous angle.

"Better think it over," said Croly Addicks, taking up the price list again.

Baldwin gazed for a full minute or more at the remade jaw of his assistant. Then he conceded, "Maybe I will."

A week later Baldwin announced that he had taken Croly's advice. The old Addicks would have waited, with anxious nerves on edge, for the announcement of Baldwin's successor; the new Addicks went straight to the chief purchasing agent.

"Mr. Cowdin," said Croly, as calmly as a bumping heart would permit, "shall I take over Baldwin's work?"

The chief purchasing agent crinkled his brow petulantly.

"I had Heaton in mind for the job," he said shortly without looking up.

"I want it," said Croly Addicks, and his jaw snapped. His tone made Cowdin look up. "Heaton isn't ripe for the work," said Croly. "I am."

Cowdin could not see that inside Croly was quivering; he could not see that the new Croly was struggling with the old and was exerting every ounce of will power he possessed to wring out the words. All Cowdin could see was the big jaw, bulging and threatening.

He cautiously poked back his office chair so that it rolled on its casters out of range of the man with the dangerous face.

"I told you once before, Addicks," began the chief purchasing agent——

"You told me once before," interrupted Croly Addicks sternly, "that the job required a man with a jaw. What do you call this?"

He tapped his own remodeled prow. Cowdin found it impossible not to rest his gaze on the spot indicated by Croly's forefinger. Unconsciously, perhaps, his beads of eyes roved over his desk in search of a convenient paperweight or other weapon. Finding none the chief

purchasing agent affected to consider the merits of Croly's demand.

"Well," he said with a judicial air, "I've a notion to give you a month's trial at the job."

"Good," said Croly; and inside he buzzed and tingled warmly.

Cowdin wheeled his office chair back within range again.

A month after Croly Addicks had taken up his duties as assistant purchasing agent he was sitting late one afternoon in serious conference with the chief purchasing agent. The day was an anxious one for all the employees of the great piano company. It was the day when the directors met in solemn and awful conclave, and the ancient and acidulous chairman of the board, Cephias Langdon, who owned most of the stock, emerged, woodchucklike, from his hole, to conduct his annual much-dreaded inquisition into the corporation's affairs, and to demand, with many searching queries, why in blue thunder the company was not making more money. On this day dignified and confident executives wriggled and wilted like tardy schoolboys under his grilling, and official heads were lopped off with a few sharp words.

As frightened secretaries slipped in and out of the mahogany-doored board room information seeped out, and breaths were held and tiptoes walked on as the reports flashed about from office to office.

"Old Langdon's on a rampage."

"He's raking the sales manager over the coals."

"He's fired Sherman, the advertising manager."

"He's fired the whole advertising department too."

"He's asking what in blue thunder is the matter with the purchasing department."

When this last ringside bulletin reached Cowdin he scowled, muttered, and reached for his hat.

"If anybody should come looking for me," he said to Croly, "tell 'em I went home sick."

"But," protested Croly, who knew well the habits of the exigent chairman of the board, "Mr. Langdon may send down here any minute for an explanation of the purchasing department's report."

Cowdin smiled sardonically.

“So he may, so he may,” he said, clapping his hat firmly on his head. “Perhaps you’d be so good as to tell him what he wants to know.”

And still smiling the chief purchasing agent hurried to the freight elevator and made his timely and prudent exit.

“Gawsh,” said the blond stenographer, “Grizzly Cowdin’s ducked again this year.”

“Gee,” said the brunette stenographer, “here’s where poor Mr. Addicks gets it where Nellie wore the beads.”

Croly knew what they were saying; he knew that he had been left to be a scapegoat. He looked around for his own hat. But as he did so he caught the reflection of his new face in the plate-glass top of his desk. The image of his big impressive jaw heartened him. He smiled grimly and waited.

He did not have long to wait. The door was thrust open and President Flagstead’s head was thrust in.

“Where’s Cowdin?” he demanded nervously. Tiny worried pearls of dew on the presidential brow bore evidence that even he had not escaped the grill.

“Home,” said Croly. “Sick.”

Mr. Flagstead frowned. The furrows of worry in his face deepened.

“Mr. Langdon is furious at the purchasing department,” he said. “He wants some things in the report explained, and he won’t wait. Confound Cowdin!”

Croly’s eyes rested for a moment on the reflection of his chin in the glass on his desk; then he raised them to the president’s.

“Mr. Cowdin left me in charge,” he said, hoping that his voice wouldn’t break. “I’ll see if I can answer Mr. Langdon’s questions.”

The president fired a swift look at Croly; at first it was dubious; then, as it appraised Croly’s set face, it grew relieved.

“Who are you?” asked the president.

“Addicks, assistant purchasing agent,” said Croly.

“Oh, the new man. I’ve noticed you around,” said the president. “Meant to introduce myself. How long have you been here?”

“Eleven years,” said Croly.

“Eleven years?” The president was unbelieving. “You couldn’t have been. I certainly would have noticed your face.” He paused a bit awkwardly. Just then they reached the mahogany door of the board room.

Croly Addicks, outwardly a picture of determination, inwardly quaking, followed the president. Old Cephas Langdon was squatting in his chair, his face red from his efforts, his eyes, beneath their tufts of brow, irate. When he spoke, his words exploded in bunches like packs of firecrackers.

“Well, well?” he snapped. “Where’s Cowdin? Why didn’t Cowdin come? I sent for Cowdin, didn’t I? I wanted to see the chief purchasing agent. Where’s Cowdin anyhow? Who are you?”

“Cowdin’s sick. I’m Addicks,” said Croly.

His voice trembled, and his hands went up to play with his necktie. They came in contact with the point of his new chin, and fresh courage came back to him. He plunged his hands into his coat pockets, pushed the chin forward.

He felt the eyes under the bushy brows surveying his chin.

“Cowdin sick, eh?” inquired Cephas Langdon acidly. “Seems to me he’s always sick when I want to find out what in blue thunder ails his department.” He held up a report. “I installed a purchasing system in 1913,” he said, slapping the report angrily, “and look here how it has been fozzled.” He slammed the report down on the table. “What I want to know, young man,” he exploded, “is why material in the Syracuse factories cost 29 per cent more for the past three months than for the same period last year. Why? Why? Why?”

He glared at Croly Addicks as if he held him personally responsible. Croly did not drop his eyes before the glare; instead he stuck his chin out another notch. His jaw muscles knotted. His breathing was difficult. The chance he’d been working for, praying for, had come.

“Your purchasing system is all wrong, Mr. Langdon,” he said, in a voice so loud that it made them all jump.

For a second it seemed as if Cephas Langdon would uncoil and leap at the presumptuous

underling with the big chin. But he didn't. Instead, with a smile in which there was a lot of irony, and some interest, he asked, "Oh, indeed? Perhaps, young man, you'll be so good as to tell me what's wrong with it? You appear to think you know a thing or two."

Croly told him. Eleven years of work and study were behind what he said, and he emphasized each point with a thrust of his jaw that would have carried conviction even had his analysis of the system been less logical and concise than it was. Old Cephas Langdon leaning on the directors' table turned up his ear trumpet so that he wouldn't miss a word.

"Well? Well? And what would you suggest instead of the old way?" he interjected frequently.

Croly had the answer ready every time. Darkness and dinnertime had come before Croly had finished.

"Flagstead," said Old Cephas Langdon, turning to the president, "haven't I always told you that what we needed in the purchasing department was a man with a chin on him? Just drop a note to Cowdin to-morrow, will you, and tell him he needn't come back?"

He turned toward Croly and twisted his leathery old face into what passed for a smile.

"Young man," he said, "don't let anything happen to that jaw of yours. One of these bright days it's going to be worth twenty-five thousand dollars a year to you."

That night a young man with a prodigious jaw sat very near a young woman named Emily Mackie, who from time to time looked from his face to the ring finger of her left hand.

"Oh, Croly dear," she said softly, "how did you do it?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "Guess I just tried to live up to my jaw."

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