

dark room at the end of the hall. He touched a button, and immediately the room was flooded with light. The stranger started. For it was a strange light—white, almost green. It emanated from a queer-shaped tube on top of young Van Twiller's desk. It was not a bad light; it was a good light, but it had the curious effect of making people's faces look as though they were dead. The stranger, other than noting this for a brief instant, gave it no further attention. He assumed that the light was some new-fangled illuminating contrivance of a scientific character, and, to a large extent, he was right.

However, Van Twiller swung the door shut and motioned the stranger to an armchair.

"What can I do for you?" inquired Van Twiller. The stranger rose and came forward. As he did so, he unwrapped a square package which he carried.

"Mr. Van Twiller," he said with a confidential smile, "here is a picture that I'd like to have you look at. I want your permission to have it published in the daily press."

Van Twiller took it and looked at it. Then he started up.

"What the deuce—" he exclaimed. The stranger only smiled.

"It's a very good picture, as you see," remarked the stranger. It was. Van Twiller had to acknowledge that. But he kept on staring at it, with his eyes almost popping out of his head.

The picture represented the interior of a cheap cafe. It was a photograph, of course. In the foreground—painfully so—was a small round table. Upon the table was a bottle of champagne. On one side of this table sat a cheap beauty of the cafe type. She was raising to her lips a glass of wine. She was not alone. On the other side of the small table, clear and distinct as life, sat a young man with a peculiar countenance.

This young man was Mr. Schuyler Van Twiller, the millionaire, the fiance of Miss Helen Standish.

"The deuce!" exclaimed Mr. Van Twiller once more, still staring at the photograph.

"It's a very clear picture," repeated the stranger gently; "very clear."

Van Twiller looked up. "Go and sit down," he commanded. The stranger obeyed.

Van Twiller put his hand to his head and thought. No, he had never been anywhere in a place that looked like that. Nor had he ever drunk champagne with a young lady in abbreviated skirts. He was quite clear on that point. Yet here was a photograph which gave the lie, apparently, to his own thoughts.

"It would show up so well in the newspaper," insisted the stranger in his soft voice.

Van Twiller thought some more. Then he looked again at the stranger.

"I was not there when that picture was taken," he said, although he had not intended to enter into any argument. The stranger only smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Neither was I, sir," he replied. "But," he added, "the picture speaks for itself. It is clear as crystal. No one," he went on, "could mistake you."

He was right. Van Twiller had a striking countenance, and his countenance had been admirably reproduced in the picture. Van Twiller rose.

"This—this is blackmail!" he exclaimed sharply.

"No, no," cried the stranger, "not at all. I ask you for nothing. All that I desired was your permission to print this in a daily paper. The paper was crazy to get it, without your permission. I said 'No.' I said to the paper, 'We should ask him first. It is only fair.' The paper," he added significantly, "is willing to pay me seven hundred and fifty dollars for the use of it. I asked them for a thousand. But I ask of you nothing at all—nothing but your permission. Blackmail! No! I ask no money. You are mistaken! It is not blackmail."

"If I refuse permission," said Van Twiller, "as, of course, I shall do—what then? Eh?"

Again the stranger shrugged his shoulders. "I have been unfortunate,"

he said; "I need money. I own the picture. The paper offers seven hundred and fifty—it will pay a thousand. I am a poor man. Why should I refuse?"

Van Twiller had heard of this sort of thing before. Now he understood. He doubted not that many of his acquaintances had been approached in this manner, upon the eve of some crisis in their careers—possibly by the same man. Some, doubtless, were assailed with photographs that were really genuine—or, if not genuine, were near enough the truth to appear so. He knew, also, that this was a pretty safe kind of traffic, especially when it concerned millionaires; for the public at large will believe almost anything of millionaires. And as for his fiancée and her family—why, they knew nothing more of him than they did of a dozen other apparently respectable young men. No matter whether the picture was just or unjust, half the world would believe it. How could they doubt it? The Standish family—well, they would think—what? He didn't know, he wasn't sure. He didn't want to think about that.

Van Twiller knew well enough that there was no newspaper in the case. He knew that the scheme originated in the brain of this man who was before him, and possibly that of an accomplice. But he believed, too, that the man would carry out the veiled threat he had made. There were papers that would not scruple to print a picture or that kind, even at the risk of a humble apology later. The only thing to do was to suppress the picture—that, and that only, was safe.

As for the rest, Van Twiller could see, with his practised eye, that the picture was made up. He could see, now, that his latest Hall and Merrill photograph had been cleverly inserted and rephotographed into the picture in his hand. It was clever. There was no doubt about that.

Why not touch a button and have this man arrested? No; he dismissed that idea as soon as it was formed. That is just where the fellow's devilish scheme pinched the hardest. This stranger, who by his looks was a determined man, would undoubtedly reward arrest by publishing the picture. Van Twiller was right. He would have done so. For he had been arrested once before and had done that very thing, and the charge had been withdrawn, and the picture had been suppressed before it had done any great amount of damage. The stranger was a blackmailer of an unusual sort, and he was ready to see his scheme through to the bitter end. His victim invariably cashed up.

It bothered Van Twiller. It bothered him all the more because he was eminently respectable, and had ever been so.

There were two sides to Van Twiller's nature. He had inherited from his father the extreme kind of caution. His father always leaned on the safe side. His mother had bequeathed to him a stubborn, belligerent personality, that admitted of no compromise.

"I think that newspaper," said the stranger, "would pay me twelve hundred and fifty dollars—maybe fifteen hundred. Who can tell?"

Van Twiller was about to yield. He said to himself it was best to pay the twelve or fifteen hundred and be on the safe side. But he looked again at the stranger and his gorge rose. His fighting blood was up. No. He would not yield an inch. He would fight this thing to the bitter end.

He kept on looking at the man. Much as he loathed him, there was something about the fellow that Van Twiller could not help admiring—especially in that greenish-white light of his, which developed in the man's face a ghastly, sinister, devilish look that attracted his attention. It reminded him of Edwin Booth as Iago, or Henry Irving as Mephistopheles.

The man was leaning slightly forward in his chair, and looking toward Van Twiller with a grin. Van Twiller turned to his desk and fumbled with a pad. There was a slight click, so slight that the stranger did not hear it.

If that click meant anything at all, certain it was that nothing palpable had happened. Van Twiller had not summoned the police nor had he summoned

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