

not fit to be seen. Ella, Ella, why don't you speak to Mr. Limner?"

"Because I have nothing to say, father," the girl retorted, with a smile that lit up her dark eyes and showed her white teeth. "How do you do, Mr. Limner—is that what I am to say? But," she added, in a swift, breathless whisper, as Hugh passed where she stood, "Stephen has told me. I'm so grateful. It will come all right, I know, but I daren't tell him just yet of our engagement."

The hand that Pallacio stretched out to his visitor was cold and clammy, and there was a curious hesitation in the old man's speech that Hugh had never noticed before.

HE spoke in a whisper that the girl at the table might not hear, and Hugh instinctively lowered his voice in reply, but all the time the father's eyes were fixed with hungry love on his daughter.

"I hope you will like the picture," Mr. Limner. It is genuine, I swear it is genuine, and worth many times the thousand pounds his lordship has agreed to pay for it, subject to your approval. It means a great deal to me, I can tell you, to lay my hands upon the money just now. I have worked hard, as you know, all my life, and I feel I'm not long for this world. Don't shake your head. I knew by your look when you came in that you saw for yourself that I am nearly done for. It is not for myself I am thinking about. Perhaps you will say I am not worth thinking about. But I should like to leave something behind me for Ella; she has always been the best of good girls to me. At one time I thought, I hoped—there is no use talking about that since it has come to nothing. It is a hard job, Mr. Limner, for a pretty girl like that to keep straight. It is for her I want the money so badly. You'll say a good word for the picture, won't you?"

"But," broke in Hugh, troubled by the earnestness of his appeal, "I'm only asked to say whether I think the picture a Rubens. I must say simply what I think."

"I ask no more," retorted Pallacio, "the picture is a Rubens, all right, you cannot mistake that, but I thought that perhaps—"

"That I would lie to injure you? You don't seem to have a very high opinion of my honesty, Pallacio!"

"You have small reason to love me, Limner, less even than you suppose. It is your chance now to get even."

"Don't be a fool, man. I bear you no ill will, and I bear great good will to your daughter, if I may say so without offence. I would go a long way to do either of you a good turn if it could be done honestly."

Pallacio's lips moved as if he would speak, but he caught back the word muttered and remained silent, gazing gloomily into the depths of the fire.

"May I see the famous picture to-morrow?" Hugh asked.

He had to repeat the question before Pallacio roused himself with a start from his reverie to answer.

"No, no, not to-morrow. It won't be ready for three or four days. Will next Monday suit you?"

"Perfectly. Next Monday at about this hour I will be here. Everything will come all right," he contrived to whisper to Ella as he passed out.

When he next came the picture was hung in a handsome old frame where the light was most searching, and Hugh stopped short, captivated by its splendour.

The old man and his daughter watched his face eagerly as he stood unconscious of their presence, intent on the glorious picture is an ecstasy of enjoyment.

Pallacio drew a deep breath of relief, and Ella whispered "I knew, I knew," while Hugh was satiated sense and soul with the feast of colour.

"Well!" Pallacio ventured at last, "it is a Rubens all right?"

Hugh woke from his trance. "A Rubens," he said, "unquestionably, and as fine as I have ever seen."

"You will tell that to Lord Sternholt. My thousand pounds are safe."

Then Hugh remembered something that had been said the previous day about the price, which had passed un-

heeded at the time because he had not seen the picture.

"A thousand pounds!" he cried. "Are you mad, Pallacio, to sell that picture for a thousand pounds?"

"And glad to get it. It is not so easy for me to sell a picture as it is for you. The dealers won't believe I came by it honestly. They will swear I faked it. When Lord Sternholt offered me a thousand pounds subject to your approval, I jumped at it."

"I will tell him what the picture is really worth," persisted Hugh.

"It would be no use. I know Lord Sternholt better than you. I know him through and through. He would laugh at the notion of his paying a penny more than he agreed to pay. Just tell him that the picture is an undoubted Rubens, and I will be ever grateful."

Hugh was not to be dissuaded, but the result proved old Pallacio right. Lord Sternholt laughed good-humouredly at the suggestion that he should increase the price agreed upon. "Have you never got a bargain, my dear Mr. Limner?" he asked, "and gloried in it. Pallacio is able to take care of himself. I don't know how the picture was come by and I don't care. But others would care. The old rascal shall have his cheque for a thousand pounds. That was what he asked, and by Jove, that's what he'll get, and not a farthing more."

So the picture was sold and delivered.

Three days later Hugh had a telephone message from Lord Sternholt asking him to call as soon as possible. There was a sharp, imperative tone in his lordship's voice that roused Hugh's anger, and he was on the point of refusing as sharply when curiosity conquered his irritation and he answered curtly he would go.

Lord Sternholt received him, as before, in the picture gallery. But the Rubens was not hung in the vacant space, but balanced carelessly against the wall.

"You are very welcome, Mr. Limner," said his lordship, and there was still the same insolent ring in his voice, nor did he offer his hand. "I wished to give you an opportunity of admiring the famous—Rubens."

"I cannot admire it too much or too often, my lord," said Hugh, quietly.

LORD STERNHOLT stared at him seriously. "Am I to believe, Mr. Limner, that with all your wonderful expert knowledge you do not know even yet the picture is a sham—an open and audacious sham? Shall I offend you more by ascribing your error to ignorance or astuteness?"

"I should prefer your lordship to impugn my skill than my honesty, if you must do either. But I still believe the picture to be a Rubens."

"Then I will prove to you in a moment that you are—mistaken."

There was an insulting pause before the last word was spoken.

"I am not, perhaps, as good a judge of a picture as you are, Mr. Limner, but I will confess that at the first casual glance I, too, believed this to be a Rubens. Still, it was on your judgment I bought it. If you had taken the precaution of looking at the back as well as the front you would have found this—"

He turned the picture as he spoke, the canvas was brown and discoloured, even roughened in parts as by age. But one spot had just been sponged clean and looked fresh and new.

"Yes," went on his lordship, the same stinging contempt in his voice. "I sponged away the soot with which it was stained. Even you will never admit that Rubens painted on that canvas. It is English make. I think I can tell you the factory where it was made. I would be glad to hear some explanation of your mistake."

"I still think the picture is a Rubens," retorted Hugh, steadily, "and one of the finest and most characteristic Rubens I have ever seen."

Lord Sternholt flushed and turned pale, and bit his lip to keep his anger down. He just contrived to hold himself together, but there was a tremor of rage in his voice when he spoke again.

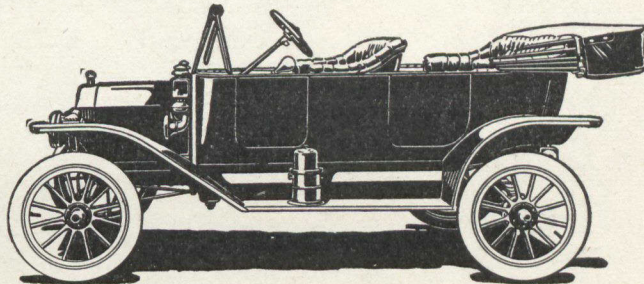
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