

"I paint it," explained the dago. "I paint. I vair good paintairr. I dam good paintairr. I son of a gun—yes, no?"

"Oh, dear," said Brasted, "what will your wife say?"

"Twenty-five hundred! Two thousand five hundred! Say, Pax, but you're stung!" cried Shotover.

"You set of swindlers!" Mr. Paxter rejoined. "A fake!"

"What about Mount Floradora Heights?" demanded a voice, whereat all laughed again. Mr. Paxter did not recognize the voice as Romford's.

"As it is a plant," he said, with great dignity, "I shall, of course, refuse to pay for it." (Auctioneer Peabody's smile vanished instantly). "Yes, refuse to pay!" repeated the indignant purchaser. He pushed his way through the crowd, and, standing by the door, added: "Put that in your pipes—and smoke it!"

*Caveat emptor*, says the Latin proverb—let the purchaser beware! Mr. Paxter walked away in the highest anger. Yes, he would refuse to pay, and they could go to law about it! They and their Venuses! Venus be hanged! Yes, he would refuse to pay, and Kendrick Evans and his crew could go to pot.

But he reckoned without his host—or rather, his friends. When he reached home—after a spell during which, believe me, his clerks felt the influence of Miss Venus—and, dragging out a chair on the porch, began to review the day's catastrophe in a dispassionate way, a big wagon drove up. Paxter knew it was going to stop at his gate before it actually did.

"Go away!" he shouted.

"Picture, name Paxter. Sign here."

"Don't want it!"

"Are you Paxter?"

"Yes—no, I'm the caretaker. Paxter's away."

"Y' kin sign for it, can't you?"

"Can't sign for anythin' without orders."

"It's a picture," said the man.

"Really? Take it away, like a good feller."

"Where 'm I to take it, anyway?"

"Keep it yourself."

"Gee, I'm a married man, with two kids."

"Well, sell it, then."

"And get pinched by the Reform League? Not for mine."

Mr. Paxter sighed desperately. He understood that Kendrick Evans, in a refinement of cruelty, had forwarded the picture without wrapping it up.

"It's yours, ain't it?" persisted the expressman.

"Yes—no, it's Mr. Paxter's—no, it isn't."

"Why won't you take it, then?"

"Don't want it. Look here—take it away—burn it, whatever you like, but take it away. Say, could you use a ten-spot, right now?"

"Sure."

"Then hike off with that blamed Venus."

"It's Venus they call the dame? Dunno what I'll do with it, but—come on, gimme the bill."

Greatly cheered, Mr. Paxter handed the man a ten-dollar bill, and, with marvellous gratification, saw him drive away. He was saved.

But was he? That was the harassing thought. Was the Venus gone, or would she turn up elsewhere? Possibly the expressman would lose his job, because Mr. Paxter had forgotten to sign; but that was nothing. The thing was—would the Venus reappear? A troubled night was Mr. Paxter's.

Sure enough, Miss Venus did reappear. When Mr. Paxter sat in his inner room next morning, a boy lurched in, and said, "Picture for you."

"Get out!" roared Mr. Paxter. The boy got out quickly. Mr. Paxter pushed his button, and the boy came in again.

"Where's that picture?"

"Gone," said the boy. Mr. Paxter smiled on him. But twenty minutes later the boy lurched in once more.