

"Careful, careful, Pax," whispered ex-Alderman Brasted. "One thousand cold, hard, solid plunks is a lot of money. And—your wife."

"Twelve hundred and fifty!" shrieked Kendrick Evans.

Mr. Paxter paused but a second before he said, "Fifteen hundred!"

Auctioneer Peabody had an uneasy idea that it was all a dream. Surely he had read of this kind of thing in books? But there, undoubtedly, was the unmistakable figure of Mr. Paxter, and those of Kendrick Evans, Bud Stevens, and the rest.

"Fifteen hundred bid!" he screeched, to see if a screech would wake him up. "Fifteen hundred, gents!"

At the back of the crowd a dirty but enthusiastic Italian, who had, it seemed, been there all the time, cheered. "'Ear, 'ear!"

"Seventeen, fifty," said Kendrick Evans.

"Two thousand," snapped Bud Stevens.

Did Bud Stevens possess all that money? thought Mr. Paxter. Anyway, he wasn't going to be beaten by him, while Kendrick Evans was in the field. "Twenty-five hundred!" he uttered pompously.

"Twenty-five hundred!" cried Peabody on high. Such had been the remarkable events of the last quarter-hour that he seemed to think this kind of thing was going on for ever. "Twenty-five hundred for the Calgary Venus. What next, gents?"

But there seemed to be no next, and Peabody looked round as much as to say, *I am waking up*. "Twenty-five hundred! Any advance on twenty-five hundred?"

Dead silence. Mr. Paxter looked round a little apprehensively.

"Going, going, at twenty-five hundred. . . . Gone!"

Mr. Paxter seemed to collapse, now the effort was concluded. "Mine!" he wheezed.

"'Ear, 'ear!" shouted the Italian, who did not apparently understand that it was all over.

"Yours, Mr. Paxter—and cheap at the price. Let me congratulate you. Show him the Venus again, Tom—little gem, ain't it?"

"Lor!" said someone who had only just come in, and had not seen the picture before.

"Trifle cold for her, eh, in the winter?" said Peabody. "Never mind, sir—a great picture, that."

"What *will* your wife say, Pax?" asked ex-Alderman Brasted, leering on him. "Oh, fie, fie!"

Mr. Paxter smiled, the indulgent smile of the victor. "Quit jollyin', boys. Anyway, I got it. Beat old Evans, didn't I?" He turned to Kendrick Evans, expecting to find chagrin depicted on that gentleman's face; but to his amazement he found only a broad grin.

"Beat you, Ken., didn't I?" he repeated, a feeling of foreboding coming over him, in spite of himself. But Evans only laughed the more. "Beat you, you old humbug, I say!" But strange to relate, Bud Stevens, Shot-over, Brasted, and all the rest, even that despicable Romford, were all grinning, too! Kendrick Evans cackled out loud.

"You dub!" he gasped at length. "You almighty mutt! Why, it's a *fake*!"

"A fake!"

"Of course! What the deuce did you think I wanted it for? Twenty-five hundred—oh, help!"

"A fake!" said Mr. Paxter, still not comprehending it fully.

"Stung!" shouted Stevens. He was guffawing in a most unseemly way.

"You mean," demanded Mr. Paxter, "that it's a plant—that you bunch ran up the bidding to make me buy a fake?"

"Right first guess, Uncle Mawruss," spluttered Bud Stevens. Even Auctioneer Peabody was grinning now.

"Here's the man!" said Kendrick Evans, pushing forward the dirty Italian, who was, it seems, Baptisto Mascagnito. "Tell him, Bap."