

says dago. 'Whaddyer come here fer?' says Junker. 'No sell,' says dago. A friend of mine—Bud Stevens, you know him, Pax—was in the store, and he told me about it. He asked the dago to show him—and you know Bud thinks he's some cheese on pictures, huh?"

"He has that idea," Mr. Paxter allowed. Bud Stevens was a lesser light, and not to be grudged praise.

"An' Bud says it was a real old masterpiece."

"That all?"

"So he told the dago to take the picture to auction."

"And—?"

"Well, if it's really what he says, it's little old picture for mine."

"I must look at it myself," said Romford, in a depressing voice.

Now Mr. Paxter's sentiments were mingled. As has been remarked, he knew nothing of art, but then, he reflected, neither did Pierpont Morgan. If it had been Pierpont Morgan's hobby to collect old masters, why should it not be his, J. Henry Paxter's? And here was Kendrick Evans claiming to be going to possess it!

"What's it a picture of?" he demanded.

"Some ancient dope—Venus, or something. Here's Bud." Mr. Stevens had sauntered in. Say, Bud, what is that blamed picture called?"

"'The Venus of the Urn,' by Michael Angelo," Bud replied.

"Oh!" grunted Mr. Paxter. The title did not sound promising; he had hoped it would be "Sunrise in Switzerland" or "Father's Coming," because either of these, he knew, would please his wife.

"It's a beaut," said Bud. "Recognized it from the newspaper pictures. Stolen from a church in Italy."

"Gen-u-ine?"

"You betcher."

"What's it worth?"

Bud drew the little knot of men together, and said, very solemnly and softly: "Two hundred thousand—to the Italian Government."

"Whew!" cried Mr. Paxter.

"But, of course, you would never pay that. Might clinch for two hundred."

"Two hundred's a lot for a picture, anyway."

"Not for a genuine Michael Angelo, you bonehead."

J. Henry thought a little while, and then inquired, "And where does this dago live?"

"Don't know."

"Say, Pax," objected Kendrick Evans, "cut that out, y'know—going to buy it privately. Come down with the rest of us to-morrow afternoon, to the auction. Have another?"

"Guess I'll be there," Mr. Paxter remarked. "No, no more for me. Guess I'll be there, surely."

"And keep your claws off that durned picture!" he added mentally. Honest, he didn't want any Venus of any Urn for himself, but Kendrick Evans wasn't going to have it if he could help.

Possibly the Acme Auction Emporium has scarcely contained, at any one time, so distinguished a concourse as that which gathered the next afternoon. Paxter was there, of course, and Kendrick Evans. Bud Stevens, Shotover (of Shotover and Miller), Mr. Romford, ex-Alderman Brasted, and other real estate men to the number of fully a score. Auctioneer Peabody smiled with great inward satisfaction. Things promised well for the "bankrupt stock" (a special consignment from the factory) that day. But, to his disgust, hardly a soul seemed to care for silver tea services or diamond rings.

"I have here, gentlemen," he said, in desperation, "a most magnificent and massive—"

Kendrick Evans, in the front row, drew him down, and whispered in his ear.

"Very well," replied the auctioneer, brightening. "Tom, bring on the Venus."

Tom went to the office and staggered back with a big canvas, unframed,