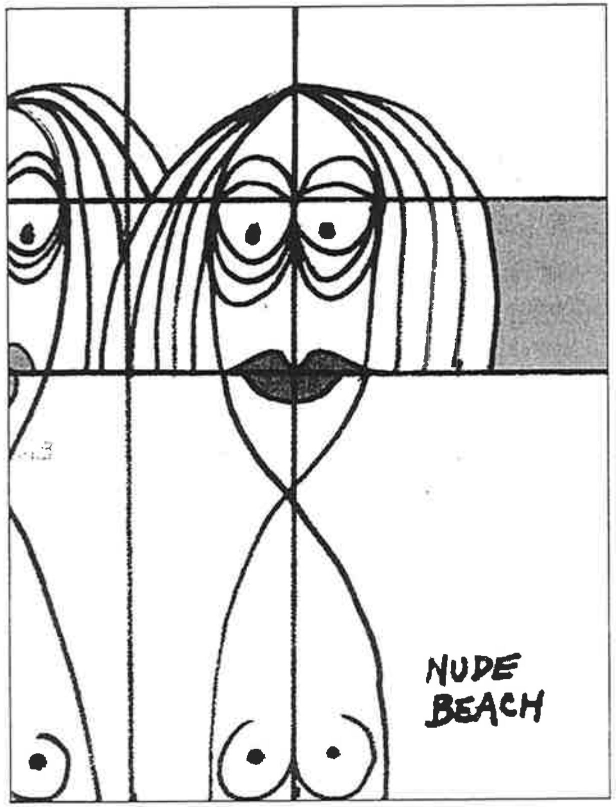

THE HUMBUGS

Life had been good to Durling Stedman. He drove a new Cadillac the color of lobster bisque. And on the back bumper of the Cadillac was a big trailer-hitch that hauled Stedman's silver home on wheels to Cape Cod in the springtime and to Florida in the fall. Stedman was an artist—a picture painter. But he didn't look like one. Part of his stock-in-trade was looking like a four-square businessman, like a no-nonsense free-enterpriser who knew what it was to meet a payroll, like a man's man who thought most artists were dreamers, who thought most art was bunk. He was sixty years old, and he looked a good deal like George Washington.

The sign over his studio in the art colony of Seminole Highlands, Florida, said it all: "Durling Stedman—Art Without Bunk." He set up shop right in the middle of struggling abstract painters. That was slick of him, because a majority of the tourists were confused and angered by the abstractionists. And then, in the middle of all the gibberish, the disgruntled tourists came upon Stedman and his work. Stedman's paintings were as pretty as postcards. And Stedman himself looked like a friend from home.

"I am an oasis," he liked to say.

Every night he did a demonstration painting on an easel in front of his studio. He did a painting in an hour flat with a crowd watching. He signified that he was done by putting a golden frame around the painting. The crowd knew then that it was all right to talk and applaud. A sudden noise couldn't spoil the masterpiece now, because the masterpiece was done.

The price of the masterpiece was on a card tacked to the frame: "65.00, frame included. Ask about our lay-away plan." The "our" on the card referred to Stedman and his wife Cornelia. Cornelia didn't know much about art, but she thought her husband was another Leonardo da Vinci.

And Cornelia wasn't the only one who thought so.

"I swear," said a thunderstruck woman in the demonstration crowd one night, "when you was doing them birch trees, it looked like you was using some kind of birch-bark paint—like all a body had to do was gob it on and it'd come out birch bark. And the same with them clouds—like you was using cloud paint, and all a body had to do was scrootch it on up top without hardly thinking."

Stedman offered her his palette and brush playfully. "Help yourself, Madam," he said. He smiled serenely, but it was an empty smile—a case of the show's going on. All was not well. When he had come out to do his demonstration on schedule, he had left his wife in tears.

Cornelia, he supposed, was still weeping in the trailer behind the studio—was still weeping over the evening paper. In the paper, an art critic had called Stedman an iridescent humbug.

"Land-a-mercy, no!" said the woman to whom Stedman had offered his palette and brush. "I couldn't make nothing look like nothing." She drew back, put her hands behind her.

And then Cornelia appeared, white and trembling—came out of the studio and stood beside her husband. "I want to say something to all these people," she said.

All those people had never seen her before. But she made them understand instantly an awful lot about her. She was scared and humble and shy—had never spoken to a crowd before. Plainly, only a cataclysm of the first magnitude could have loosened her tongue. Cornelia Stedman was suddenly universal—representing all sweet, quiet, affectionate, bewildered housewives full of years.

Stedman was speechless. He had expected nothing like this.

"Ten days from now," said Cornelia unevenly, "my husband's gonna be sixty. And I just wonder how much longer we're gonna have to wait before the world finally wakes up and admits he's one of the greatest painters who ever lived." She bit her lip and fought back tears.

"Some high art muckety-muck from the paper says in the paper tonight that my husband's some kind of a humbug." Now the tears came. "There's a nice birthday present for a man who's given his whole life to art," she said.

The thought broke her up so much that she could hardly begin her next sentence. "My husband," she said at last, "entered ten beautiful pictures in the Annual Exhibition of the so-called Seminole Highlands Art Association, and every one of 'em got rejected." She pointed to a painting in the window of a studio across the street. Her lips moved. She was trying to say something about the painting, a huge, shocking abstract, but no coherent sounds came from her throat.

Cornelia's speech was over. Stedman led her tenderly into the studio, closed the door.

Stedman kissed his wife and made her a drink. He was in a peculiar position, since he knew perfectly well that he was a humbug. He knew his paintings were awful, knew what a good picture was, knew what a good painter was. But he had somehow never passed the information on to his wife. Cornelia's high opinion of his talent, while showing dreadful taste, was the most precious thing that Stedman had.

When Cornelia had finished her drink, she finished her speech, too. "All your beautiful pictures got rejected," she said. She pointed to the painting across the street with a hand that was now steady and deadly. "And that mess across the street won first prize," she said.

"Well, honey bunch," said Stedman, "like we've always said, we've got to take the bad with the good, and the good's been mighty good." The painting across the street was superbly imaginative, powerful, sincere—and Stedman knew it, felt it in his bones.

"There's all kinds of painting styles, honey bunch," he said, "and some kinds of people like one kind and some kinds of people like another kind, and that's the way the ball bounces."

Cornelia continued to stare across the street. "I wouldn't give that awful thing houseroom," she said darkly. "There's a big conspiracy going on against you," she said, "and it's high time somebody blew the whistle."

Cornelia stood up, slowly, dangerously, still staring across the street. "Now what's she think she's pasting in the window?" she said.

Across the street, Sylvia Lazarro was taping a newspaper article to the front window of her husband's studio. It was the article that called Stedman a humbug.

Sylvia was putting it up for all to see, not because of the humbug crack but because of what it said about her husband, John Lazarro. It said Lazarro was the most exciting young abstractionist in Florida. It said Lazarro was capable of expressing complex emotions with extraordinarily simple elements. It said Lazarro painted with the rarest of all pigments—Lazarro painted with soul.

It said also that Lazarro had begun his art career as a boy wonder, discovered in the Chicago slums. He was now only twenty-three. He had never been to art school. He was self-taught.

In the window with the clipping was the painting that had won all the praise and a two-hundred-dollar first prize besides.

In the painting, Lazarro had tried to trap on canvas the pregnant stillness, massive ache and cold sweat in the moment before the break of a thunderstorm. The clouds didn't look like real clouds. They looked like big gray boulders—as solid as granite, but somehow spongy and sopping, too. And the ground didn't look like real ground. It looked like hot, tarnished copper.

There was no shelter in sight. Anyone caught in that godforsaken moment in that godforsaken place would have to cower on that hot copper under those big wet boulders—would have to take whatever Nature was going to hurl down next.

It was an upsetting painting, a painting that only a museum or a dedicated collector would give houseroom to. Lazarro's sales were few.

Lazarro himself was upsetting—seemingly crude and angry. He liked to seem dangerous, to seem the hoodlum he'd almost been. He wasn't dangerous. He was afraid. He was afraid that he was the biggest humbug of all.

He lay fully dressed on his bed in the dark. The only light in his studio came from the overflow of Stedman's profligate lighting scheme across the way. He was thinking morosely about the presents he had hoped to buy with his two-hundred-dollar first prize. The presents would have gone to his wife, but creditors had snatched the prize money away.

Sylvia left the window, sat down on the edge of his bed. She had been a pert, uncomplicated waitress when Lazarro had wooed her. Three years with a complicated, brilliant husband had put circles under her eyes. And bill collectors had reduced her pertness to gamely gay despair. But Sylvia wasn't about to give up. She thought her husband was another Raphael.

"Why wouldn't you read what the man said about you in the paper?" she said.

"Art critics never make any sense to me," said Lazarro.

"You make a lot of sense to them," said Sylvia.

"Hooray," said Lazarro emptily. The more praise he got from critics, the more he secretly cowered on hot copper under a boulder sky. His hands and eyes were so poorly disciplined that he could not draw the simplest likeness. His paintings were brutal, not because he wished to express brutality, but because he could paint no other way. On the surface, Lazarro had only contempt for Stedman. Down deep, he was in awe of Stedman's hands and eyes—hands and eyes that could do anything Stedman asked them to do.

"Lord Stedman has a birthday in ten days," said Sylvia. She had nicknamed the Stedmans "Lord and Lady Stedman" because they were so rich—and because the Lazarros were so poor. "Lady Stedman just came out of the trailer and made a big speech about it."

"Speech?" said Lazarro. "I didn't know Lady Stedman had a voice."

"She had one tonight," said Sylvia. "She was clear off her rocker because the paper called her husband a humbug."

Lazarro took her hand tenderly. "Will you protect me, baby, if anybody ever says that about me?"

"I'd kill anybody who said that about you," said Sylvia.

"You haven't got a cigarette, have you?" said Lazarro.

"Out," said Sylvia. They had been out since noon.

"I thought maybe you'd found a pack hidden around," said Lazarro.

Sylvia was on her feet. "I'll borrow some next door," she said.

Lazarro clung to her hand. "No, no—no," he said. "Don't borrow anything more next door."

"If you want a cigarette so badly—" said Sylvia.

"Never mind. Forget it," said Lazarro, a little wildly. "I'm giving 'em up. The first few days are the hardest. Save a lot of money—feel a lot better."

Sylvia squeezed his hand, let go of it—went to the beaverboard wall and drummed with her fists. "It's so unfair," she said bitterly. "I hate them."

"Hate who?" said Lazarro, sitting up.

"Lord and Lady Stedman!" said Sylvia through clenched teeth. "Showing off all their money over there. Lord Stedman with his big, fat twenty-five-cent cigar stuck in his face—selling those silly pictures of his hand over fist—and here's you, trying to bring something new and wonderful and original into the world, and you can't even have a cigarette when you want one!"

There was a firm knock on the door. There were the sounds of a small crowd out there, too, as though Stedman's demonstration crowd had crossed the street.

And then Stedman himself spoke up outside the door, said plaintively, "Now, honey bunch—"

Sylvia went to the door, opened it.

Outside stood Lady Stedman, very proud, Lord Stedman, very wretched, and a crowd, very interested.

"Take that rotten thing out of your window this very instant," Cornelia Stedman said to Sylvia Lazarro.

"Take what out of my window?" said Sylvia.

"Take that clipping out of your window," said Cornelia.

"What about the clipping?" said Sylvia.

"You know what about the clipping," said Cornelia.

Lazarro heard the women's voices rising. The voices sounded harmless enough at first—merely business-like. But each sentence ended on a slightly higher note.

Lazarro reached the door of the studio just in time to witness the moment before the break of a fight between two nice women—between two nice women pushed too far. The clouds that seemed to hang over Cornelia and Sylvia weren't wet and massive. They were a luminous, poisonous green.

"You mean," said Sylvia crisply, "the part of the clipping that says your husband is a humbug or the part that says my husband is great?"

The storm broke.

The women didn't touch each other. They stood apart and whaled away with awful truths. And no matter what they yelled, they didn't hurt each other at all. The mad joy of a battle finally joined improved them both.

It was the husbands who were being dilapidated. Every time Cornelia hurled a taunt, it hit Lazarro hard. She knew him for the clumsy fraud he was.

Lazarro glanced at Stedman, saw that Stedman winced and sucked in air every time Sylvia let a good gibe fly.

When the fight entered its declining phase, the women's words were clearer, more deliberate.

"Do you honestly think my husband couldn't paint a silly old picture of an Indian in a birch-bark canoe or a cabin in a valley?" said Sylvia Lazarro. "He could do it without even thinking! He paints the way he paints because he's too honest to copy old calendars."

"You really think my husband couldn't paint big hunks of glunk just any which way, and think up some fancy name for it?" said Cornelia Stedman. "You think he couldn't ook and gook paint around so's one of your high muckety-muck critic friends would come around and look at the mess and say, 'Now there's what I call real soul'? You really think that?"

"You bet I think that," said Sylvia.

"You want to have a little contest?" said Cornelia.

"Anything you say," said Sylvia.

"All righty," said Cornelia. "Tonight your husband'll do a picture of something that really looks like something, and tonight my husband'll paint with what you call soul." She tossed her gray head. "And we'll just see who eats crow tomorrow."

"You're on," said Sylvia happily. "You're on."

* * *

"Just squook the old paint on," said Cornelia Stedman. She felt marvelous, looked twenty years younger. She was looking over her husband's shoulder.

Stedman was seated bleakly before a blank canvas.

Cornelia picked up a tube of paint, squeezed it hard, laid a vermilion worm on the canvas. "All righty," she said, "now you take it from there." Stedman picked up a brush listlessly, did nothing with it. He knew he was going to fail.

He had been living cheerfully with artistic failure for years. He had managed to coat it with the sugar of ready cash. But now he was sure that his failure was going to be presented to him so nakedly, so dramatically, that he could only take it for the ghastly thing it was.

He did not doubt that Lazarro was now creating across the street a painting so well drawn, so vibrant, that even Cornelia and the demonstration crowds would be struck dumb. And Stedman would be so shamed that he would never touch a brush again.

He looked everywhere but at the canvas, studied the paintings and signs on the studio walls as though he had never seen them before. "A ten percent deposit holds anything Stedman does," said a sign. "At no extra charge," said a sign, "Stedman will work the colors of a customer's drapes, carpet, and upholstery into a sunset." "Stedman," said a sign, "will make a genuine oil painting from any photograph." Stedman found himself wondering who this bustling Stedman was.

Stedman now considered Stedman's work. One theme occurred in every painting—a cunning little cottage with smoke coming from its fieldstone chimney. It was a sturdy little cottage that no wolf could ever huff and puff down. And the cottage seemed to say, no matter where Stedman set it down, "Come in, weary stranger, whoever you are—come in and rest your bones."

Stedman wished he could drag himself inside the cottage, close the doors and shutters, and huddle before the fire. He comprehended vaguely that that was where he had been, in fact, for the last thirty-five years.

Now he was being dragged out.

"Sweetheart—" said Cornelia.

"Hm?" said Stedman.

"Aren't you glad?" she said.

"Glad?" said Stedman.

"About how we're having out about who's the real artist?" said Cornelia.

"Glad as can be," said Stedman. He managed a smile.

"Then why don't you go ahead and paint?" said Cornelia.

"Why not?" said Stedman. He raised his brush, made flicking thrusts at the vermilion worm. In seconds he had created a vermilion clump of birch. A dozen more thoughtless thrusts, and he had erected a small vermilion cottage next to the clump of trees.

"An Indian—do an Indian," said Sylvia Lazarro, and she laughed because Stedman was always doing Indians. Sylvia put a fresh canvas on Lazarro's easel, sketched on it with her fingertip. "Make him bright red," she said, "and give him a big eagle beak. And put a sunset over a mountain in the background, with a little cottage on the side of the mountain."

Lazarro's eyes were glazed. "All in one picture?" he said glumly.

"Sure," said Sylvia. She was a frisky bride again. "Put all kinds of stuff in, so people will shut up once and for all about how their kids can draw better than you can."

Lazarro hunched over, rubbed his eyes. It was absolutely true that he drew like a child. He drew like an astonishing, wildly imaginative child—but like a child all the same. Some of the things he did now, in fact, were almost indistinguishable from things he had done in childhood.

Lazarro found himself wondering if perhaps his greatest work hadn't been his very first. His first work of any importance had been in stolen colored chalk on a sidewalk in the shadows of a Chicago El. He had been twelve.

He had begun his first big work as a piece of slum-craftiness, part racket, part practical joke. Bigger and bigger the bright chalk picture had grown—and crazier and crazier. Green sheets of rain, laced with black lightning, fell on jumbled pyramids. It was daytime here and nighttime there, with a pale gray moon making daytime, with a hot red sun making night.

And the bigger and crazier the picture had become, the more a growing crowd had loved it. Change had showered on the sidewalk. Strangers had brought the artist more chalk. Police had come. Reporters had come. Photographers had come. The mayor himself had come.

When young Lazarro had arisen at last from his hands and knees, he had made himself, for one summer day at least, the most famous and beloved artist in the Middle West. Now he wasn't a boy anymore. He was a man who made his living painting like a boy, and his wife was asking him to paint an Indian that really looked like an Indian.

"It will be so easy for you," said Sylvia. "You won't have to put soul in it or anything." She scowled and shaded her

eyes, pretended to scan the horizon like a Stedman Indian. "Just do um heap big Injun," she said.

By one in the morning, Durling Stedman had driven himself almost out of his wits. Pounds of paint had been laid on the canvas before him. Pounds had been scraped away. No matter how abstract Stedman made his beginnings, the hackneyed themes of a lifetime came through. He could not restrain a cube from turning into a cottage, a cone from turning into a snow-capped mountain, a sphere from becoming a harvest moon. And Indians popped up everywhere, numerous enough at times for a panorama of Custer's Last Stand.

"You just can't keep your talent from busting right through, can you?" his wife Cornelia said.

Stedman blew up, ordered her to bed.

"It would be a hell of a help if you wouldn't watch," John Lazarro said to his wife peevishly.

"I just want to keep you from working too hard at it," said Sylvia. She yawned. "If I leave you alone with it, I'm afraid you'll start putting soul in it and get it all complicated. Just paint an Indian."

"I *am* painting an Indian," said Lazarro, his nerves twanging.

"You—you mind if I ask a question?" said Sylvia.

Lazarro closed his eyes. "Not at all," he said.

"Where's the Indian?" she said.

Lazarro gritted his teeth, pointed to the middle of the canvas. "There's your lousy Indian," he said.

"A green Indian?" said Sylvia.

"That's the underpainting," said Lazarro.

Sylvia put her arms around him, babied him. "Honey," she said, "please don't underpaint. Just start right off with an Indian." She picked up a tube of paint. "Here—this is a good color for an Indian. Just draw the Indian, then color him with this—like in a Mickey Mouse coloring book."

Lazarro threw his brush across the room. "I couldn't even color a picture of Mickey Mouse with somebody looking over my shoulder!" he yelled.

Sylvia backed away. "Sorry. I'm just trying to tell you how easy it should be," she said.

"Go to bed!" said Lazarro. "You'll get your stinking Indian! Just go to bed."

Stedman heard Lazarro's yell, mistook it for a yell of joy. Stedman thought that the yell could mean one of two things—that Lazarro had finished his painting, or that the painting had jelled and would very soon be done.

He imagined Lazarro's painting—saw it now as a shimmering Tintoretto, now as a shadowy Caravaggio, now as a swirling Rubens.

Doggedly, not caring if he lived or died, Stedman began killing Indians with his palette knife again. His self-contempt was now at its peak.

He stopped working completely when he realized how profound his contempt for himself was. It was so profound that he could decide without shame to go across the street and buy a painting with soul from Lazarro. He would pay a great deal for a Lazarro painting, for the right to sign his own name to it, for Lazarro's keeping quiet about the whole shabby deal.

Having come to this decision, Stedman began to paint again. He painted now in an orgy of being his good old, vulgar, soulless self.

He created a mountain range with a dozen saber strokes. He dragged his brush above the mountains, and his brush trailed clouds behind. He shook his brush at the mountainsides, and Indians tumbled out.

The Indians formed at once for an attack on some poor thing in the valley. Stedman knew what the poor thing was. They were going to attack his precious cottage. He stood to paint the cottage angrily. He painted the front door ajar. He painted himself inside. "There's the essence of Stedman!" he sneered. He chuckled bitterly. "There the old fool is."

Stedman went back to the trailer, made sure Cornelia was sound asleep. He counted the money in his billfold, then stole back through his studio and across the street.

Lazarro was exhausted. He didn't feel that he had been painting for the past five hours. He felt that he had been trying to rescue a cigar-store Indian from quicksand. The quicksand was the paint on Lazarro's canvas.

Lazarro had given up on pulling the Indian to the surface. He had let the Indian slip away at last to the Happy Hunting Ground.

The surface of the painting closed over the Indian, closed over Lazarro's self-respect, too. Life had called Lazarro's bluff, as he'd always known it would.

He smiled like a racketeer, hoped to feel that he had gotten away with a very funny swindle for a good number of years. But he couldn't feel that way. He cared terribly about painting, wanted terribly to go on painting. If he was a racketeer, he was the racket's most pathetic victim, too.

As Lazarro dropped his clumsy hands into his lap, he thought of what the deft hands of Stedman must now be doing. If Stedman told those magical hands to be worldly, like Picasso's, they would be worldly. If he told those hands to be rigidly rectilinear, like Mondrian's, they would be rigidly rectilinear. If he told those hands to be wickedly childish, like Klee's, they would be wickedly childish. If he told those hands to be fumblingly angry, like Lazarro's, those magical hands of Stedman's could be that way, too.

Lazarro had sunk so low that it actually flashed into his mind to steal a painting of Stedman's, to sign his own name to it, to threaten the poor old man with violence if he dared to say a word.

Lazarro could sink no lower. He began to paint now about how low he felt—about how crooked, how crude, how dirty Lazarro was. The painting was mostly black. It was the last painting Lazarro was ever going to do, and its title was *No Damn Good.*

There was a sound at the studio's front door, as though a sick animal were outside. Lazarro went on painting feverishly.

The sound came again.

Lazarro went to the door, opened it.

Outside stood Lord Stedman. "If I look like a man who's just about to be hanged," said Stedman, "that's exactly how I feel."

"Come in," said Lazarro. "Come in."

Durling Stedman slept until eleven in the morning. He tried to make himself sleep longer, but he could not. He did not want to get up.

In analyzing his reasons for not wanting to get up, Stedman found that he wasn't afraid of the day. He had, after all, solved his problem of the night before neatly—by trading paintings with Lazarro. He no longer feared humiliation. He had signed his name to a painting with soul. Glory was probably awaiting him in the strange stillness outside.

What made Stedman not want to get up was a feeling that he had lost something priceless in the lunatic night.

As he shaved and examined himself in the mirror, he knew that the priceless thing he had lost wasn't integrity. He was still the same old genial humbug. Nor had he lost cash. He and Lazarro had traded even-Steven.

There was no one in his studio as he passed through it from his trailer to the front. It was too early for tourists to be coming through. They wouldn't appear until noon. Nor did Cornelia seem to be around.

The feeling that he had lost something important was now so strong that Stedman gave in to a compulsion to rummage through drawers and cabinets in the studio for only-God-knew-what. He wanted his wife to help him.

"Honey bunch—?" he called.

"There he is!" Cornelia cried outside. She came in, hustled him merrily out to the easel where he did his demonstrations. On the easel was Lazarro's black painting. It was signed by Stedman.

In daylight it had an altogether new quality. The blacks glistened, were alive. And the colors other than black no longer seemed merely muddy variations on black. They gave the painting the soft, holy, timeless translucence of a stained glass window. The painting, moreover, was not obviously a Lazarro. It was far better than a Lazarro, because it wasn't a picture of fear. It was a picture of beauty, pride, and vibrant affirmation.

Cornelia was radiant. "You won, honey—you *won,*" she said.

In a grave semicircle before the painting stood a small audience altogether different from that to which Stedman was accustomed. The serious artists had come quietly to see what Stedman had done. They were confused, rueful, and respectful—for the shallow, foolish Stedman had proved that he was the master of them all. They saluted the new master with bittersweet smiles.

"And look at that mess over there!" crowed Cornelia. She pointed across the street. In the window of Lazarro's studio was the painting Stedman had done the night before. It was signed by Lazarro.

Stedman was amazed. The painting looked nothing like a Stedman. It looked something like a postcard, all right, but like a postcard mailed from a private hell.

The Indians and the cottage and the old man huddled in the cottage and the mountains and the clouds didn't conspire this time for bombastic romance and prettiness. With the storytelling quality of a Brueghel, with the sweep of a Turner, with the color of a Giorgione, the painting spoke of an old man's troubled soul.

The painting was the priceless thing that Stedman had lost in the night. It was the only fine thing he had ever done.

Lazarro was crossing the street now, coming toward Stedman, looking wild.

Sylvia Lazarro was with him, protesting as they came.

"I've never seen you like this," she said. "What's the matter with you?"

"I want that picture," said Lazarro, loudly, indignantly. "How much you take for it?" he snarled at Stedman. "I haven't got any money now, but I'll pay you when I get some—anything you want. Name your price."

"Have you gone crazy?" said Sylvia. "That's a lousy painting. I wouldn't give it houseroom."

"Shut up!" said Lazarro.

Sylvia shut up.

"Would—would you by any chance consider an even trade?" said Stedman.

Cornelia Stedman laughed. "Trade this beautiful thing here for that slop pile over there?" she said.

"Silence!" said Stedman. For once he was really as grand as he seemed. He shook Lazarro's hand warmly. "Done," he said.