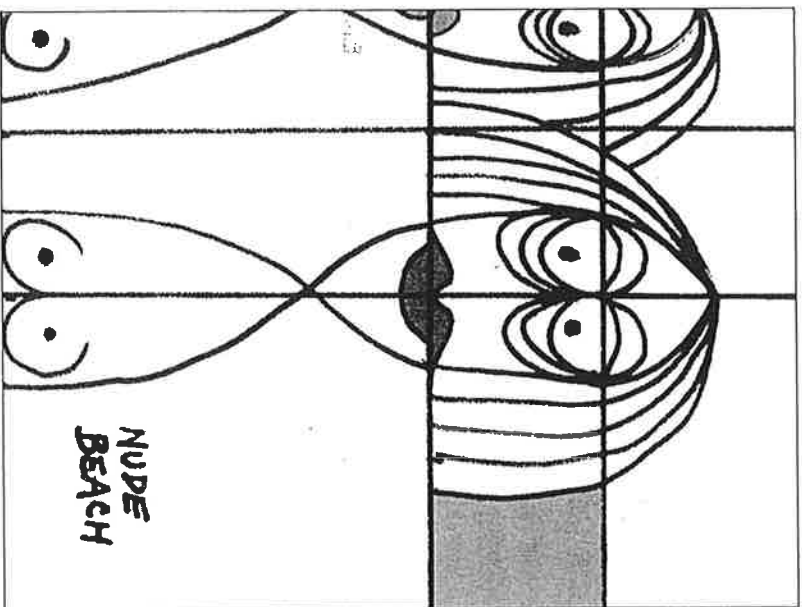


T B B B U M B U G S



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 muckery—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 house room," 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—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 house room 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 covered 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 Lazarrs 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 muckey-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 right," 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."