

\* \* \*

"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 right," 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 slumcraftiness, 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 Siedman Indian. "Just do um heap big Injun," she said.

By one in the morning, Durling Siedman 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 Siedman 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.

Siedman 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 canvases.

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 transience 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 inspire 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 houserroom."

"Shut up!" said Lazarro.

Sylvia shut up.

"Would—you 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.