

# Completely Done in Oils By Octavus Roy Cohen

**L**YMUS JOHNSON ceased apologetically into Birmingham, and, as the result of timid inquiry, eventually made meek application for admission into the home of Sis Callie Flukers in the capacity of paying guest.

Sis Callie eyed the applicant skeptically. Lyumus, edging awkwardly and uncertainly, was nothing to grow enthusiastic over. He reminded Sis Callie of an accident which had long since had its day, and might possibly have another. So she stiffened her attenuated figure and sniffed a query.

"How come you to git heah?"

Lyumus' voice was pitifully thin. "Feller tol' me this was a good boardin' place, Miss Flukers."

"Feller tol' you?"

"Uh-huh!"

"What his name was?"

Lyumus bent his head in deep thought. Then he looked up brightly. "I got it. He 'lowed his name was Florian Slapper."

"The light of battle flared in Sis Callie's eyes. 'Florian always was tryin' to make jokes on me.'"

Lyumus ducked hastily. "Reckon I'd oughter be goin'."

"Wait a minute."

"Yas'm."

Sis Callie scrutinized the cringing figure. Lyumus wiggled nervously under inspection. Neither was making a pronounced hit with the other. As for Sis Callie, she was thinking: she needed boarders—somehow her acid tongue made her establishment not overly popular, and here was a man who promised permanency if nothing more.

True, he was not the man she would have selected. He was small and skinny and very, very black. In his right hand he clutched a near leather handbag and in the left an appallingly creaky tin box. Still, he didn't appear to be the sort of person to assume a board bill and then elude the financial obligation. Sis Callie derived deeper into the matter.

"What yo' name is?"

"L—L—Lyumus Johnson."

"Where you is from?"

"Wh—where is I from?"

"You eched me."

"Dunno. Reckon you might say I is from Knoxville, or Pensacola, or sumthin' like'n to that."

"You travels?"

"I has. Some. But I aims to stay in Bummin'ham from now on hencefor'd."

"Hm! What you does fo' a livin'?"

The stranger at the gates glanced affectionately at the tin box. "I paints!" he announced modestly.

"You whiches?"

"I paints!"

Sis Callie was enveloped by a sudden warm glow of interest. "You paints?"

"Yas'm."

"You—mean you is a artist?"

"Uh-huh! I soht o' 'em be."

The front door gaped invitingly. "C'mon," commanded Sis Callie, a-quiver with excitement. "C'mon in an' sillee' yo' room."

Twenty minutes later Sis Callie reverently closed the door of the best room in her home and walked weakly to the parlor, where she sank into an easy chair to reflect intensively upon the deceptive qualities of personal appearance. She sighed with relief in contemplation of the fact that she had obtained as a boarder the first negro artist in Birmingham's social history. Truly, Sis Callie had all unwittingly annexed a plum for her society cap.

As for the newly-arrived celebrity, he rescued a veteran pipe from the depths of a frayed pocket, tapped down the tobacco, and mixed a match to it. A few deep puffs served to soothe his shaken nerves.

He stretched out on the bed and gave himself over to some careful thought. And gradually there seeped through his brain the vague idea that somewhere, somehow, there had arisen a misunderstanding. Finally he sat straight on the bed and put his findings into words.

"Dawg-gawn!" exclaimed Lyumus Johnson, "that woman is done gone and gotten herself the idea that I is a regular artist!"

And at the thought even Lyumus Johnson smiled. An artist! The word opened a new vista before his eyes, was the complete paraphernalia of the sign painting craft.

But events were transpiring which were destined to affect Mr. Johnson's immediate future and professional status. Sis Callie was on the job.

It was but the work of a moment to put on her best made-over hat and hit a due course for the pretentious residence of Mr. Lisha Tarring, where dwelt Mrs. Edner Tarring.

There reigned in the heart of Sis Callie Flukers a deep and abiding dislike for Mrs. Tarring. In fact, there were few feminine members of Birmingham's society who crowded who had anything of the elegance to quote regarding the newest addition to their inner circle.

The principal fault to be found with Edner Tarring was that she was pretty. Even her enemies were unable to deny her that compliment. She was a rich chocolate in complexion with a figure lavishing in curves which were placed where curves are most desirable. More, she was a traveled woman, having at various times in her career resided in cities as far apart as Bangor, Me., and San Antonio, Tex. She claimed acquaintanceship with every colored notable in the country, and from the day of her Birmingham advent as bride to the wealthy and influential Lisha Tarring she swept her way to social supremacy with the haughty beam of a duenna.

She found Edner sunning herself on the veranda of the Tarring home. Sis Callie hoped at sight of her enemy. Some day she expected to find Edner losing sight of her social position and bade her be very in the most comfortable chair of a very comfortable porch suite. Sis Callie banged antagonistically into a sitting posture and laid down a barrage.

"Reckon you thinks you knows mos' ev'ry-thing, doesn't you, Miss Tarring?"

"Not hardly, Sis Callie."

"Well then, you thinks you knows mos' ev'ry-thing?"

"N'r neither I ain't claimin' that."

"An' you knows a heap of prominent cullud folks?"

"Some sev'al."

"Well—and Sis Callie leaned forward venomously—"Is you ever hear tell of a cullud artist?"

Edner's figure grew a bit rigid and her eyes opened with interest.

"A which?" she inquired.

"A cullud artist—a feller which paints bitches fo' a livin'."

Edner shrugged. "They ain't no such a thing."

"Ain't there?" beamed Sis Callie triumphantly.

"I ain't never hear tell of one."

"Huh! Miss Tarring, they's a heap of things you don't know nothin' 'bout—an' art is one of 'em. An' as fo' reemakin' that they ain't no cullud artist—'bout meannin' to be personal, Miss Tarring, you makes me think that ignorance 'bout art is the only thing you ain't got nothin' else 'bout."

Edner sneered. "You says words, Sis Callie, but they don't make sense."

"How come not?"

"Fum what you says—you ac's like you

Then they closed miserably and a spasm of agony gripped his skinny frame. He shook his head.

"The Edner ain't gwine do a tall. Boss man. This heah Venus ain't got no clothes on."

The salesman argued, pleaded, enjoined. He finally cut the price in half. Lyumus stood off and inspected the nude lady carefully.

"Did that lady pose jes' like that pitcher says she done?" he inquired in awe.

"Certainly," retorted the other. "Artist's models always pose in the nude."

"Wiggin' trips! An' folks thinkin' I is a artist!"

"Hot dam!" he cried. "Ise got it."

"What?" smiled the shopkeeper.

"The plan which I craves."

Lyumus produced two dollars and a half. "Gimme that artwork, Cap'n. We trades."

Three-quarters of an hour later, Lyumus unfolded the portrait of the immodest Venus in the sanctuary of his room. He gazed proudly upon the charms of her figure—not because of the charms, but because he had conceived a brilliant scheme whereby she was to become Edner Tarring—Edner fully and modestly clothed.

Lyumus was by profession a sign painter, and an exceedingly good one. He was deft with a brush, and drawing garment advertisements was one of the best things he did. So it was that the idea had come to him of mounting Venus on an easel, allowing Edner to see her portrait and then gracefully paint a full complement of clothes upon her nude figure.

Lyumus was exceedingly pleased with himself. The scheme was magnificently simple and required only a modicum of preparation.

Edner Tarring was on time to the minute. Lyumus improvised a date, upon which he placed her as an occupant of his sole easy chair. She settled herself comfortably and Lyumus went to his trunk, from which he extracted the rolled canvas.

Lyumus had never seen artists at work, but then—neither had Edner. And so he got away with the preliminaries very well. Everything set, he turned to his paint kit and mixed a large slab of rich brown. He addressed Edner: "Set stiddy now. I commence."

Lyumus' plan of campaign was complete—and logical. Venus wore no clothes. Therefore, he envisioned Edner in the same frank condition. Obviously, whatever charms her figure might have, the completely nude would pick them up, and Lyumus would be brown to the skin.

And so his plan was to make the figure life-like in complexion, and then garb it fittingly. The painting of the clothes worried him not at all.

For two hours Lyumus worked, then laid down his brushes and meticulously draped the canvas to cheesecloth, cheesecloth folded to several thicknesses. Edner rose stiffly, but gratefully. An engagement was made for the same hour the following day, and Edner departed triumphantly.

Alone, Lyumus removed the cheesecloth and proudly inspected his handiwork. Edner, as she stood now, was chocolate to the waist and blonde from there down. It appeared to the exalted Lyumus as though he himself had created the entire being. Then he regretfully covered the picture and went forth into the streets of Birmingham.

Near the Penny Prudential Bank building Lyumus encountered Prissilla Wattles. He palpatated with love, but Lyumus was a humble man who feared a second rebuff from the darling of his heart. Therefore, in preference to that, he lifted his hat stiffly and would have passed on, but the now contrite Prissilla halted him. Briefly she apologized for her hostile attitude of the previous day. Lyumus smiled and said: "That big feller—Noah Lee," he asked. "Is hearn tell that you an' him was mos' engaged to make mal'agee once?"

Prissilla sniffed. "I an' him! Huh! Mebbe so he was engage to me, but I never wa'n't engaged to him."

"That's all right, then. But I soht of jedge that he is lovin' you a heap, Prissilla."

"Reckon he is. But lovin' ain't gittin'."

"Bless the Lawd!"

"Ceptin' fo' one man," she vouchsafed, coyly. "Name which?"

She hung her head. "That's be tellin', Lyumus. An' the feller which I loves ain't never ast to be tol'."

They adjourned to the Gold Crown Ice Cream parlor. But what Lyumus did not know was that while they were quaffing the creamy, foamy concoctions the massive figure of Noah Lee bulked balefully in the doorway for about two minutes and immediately thereafter Noah departed muttering dire threats having to do directly with the mutilation of Lyumus' skinny little body.

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That night Lyumus called upon Prissilla Wattles. Long before his assignment to paint Edner's portrait they had considered that they were going to become engaged. But this was their first evening together as a couple actually pledged to one another. They sat on a battered lounge in a dark corner of the parlor and found that the outlook upon the future was a rosy thing indeed. But in the midst of their rapture a sinister figure intruded.

There came a rap at the door. Lyumus and Prissilla sidled apart, and Prissilla extended a lukewarm invitation to "Come in." Noah Lee came in.

He glared malevolently at the pair on the lounge. Lyumus squirmed uncomfortably, for reflected in the narrowed eyes of his rival he discerned much bloody murder and one extremely sudden death.

"Well?" growled Noah accusingly.

Lyumus cleared his throat, but the words refused to come. Prissilla answered:

"Well, which?"

"What this heah mean?"

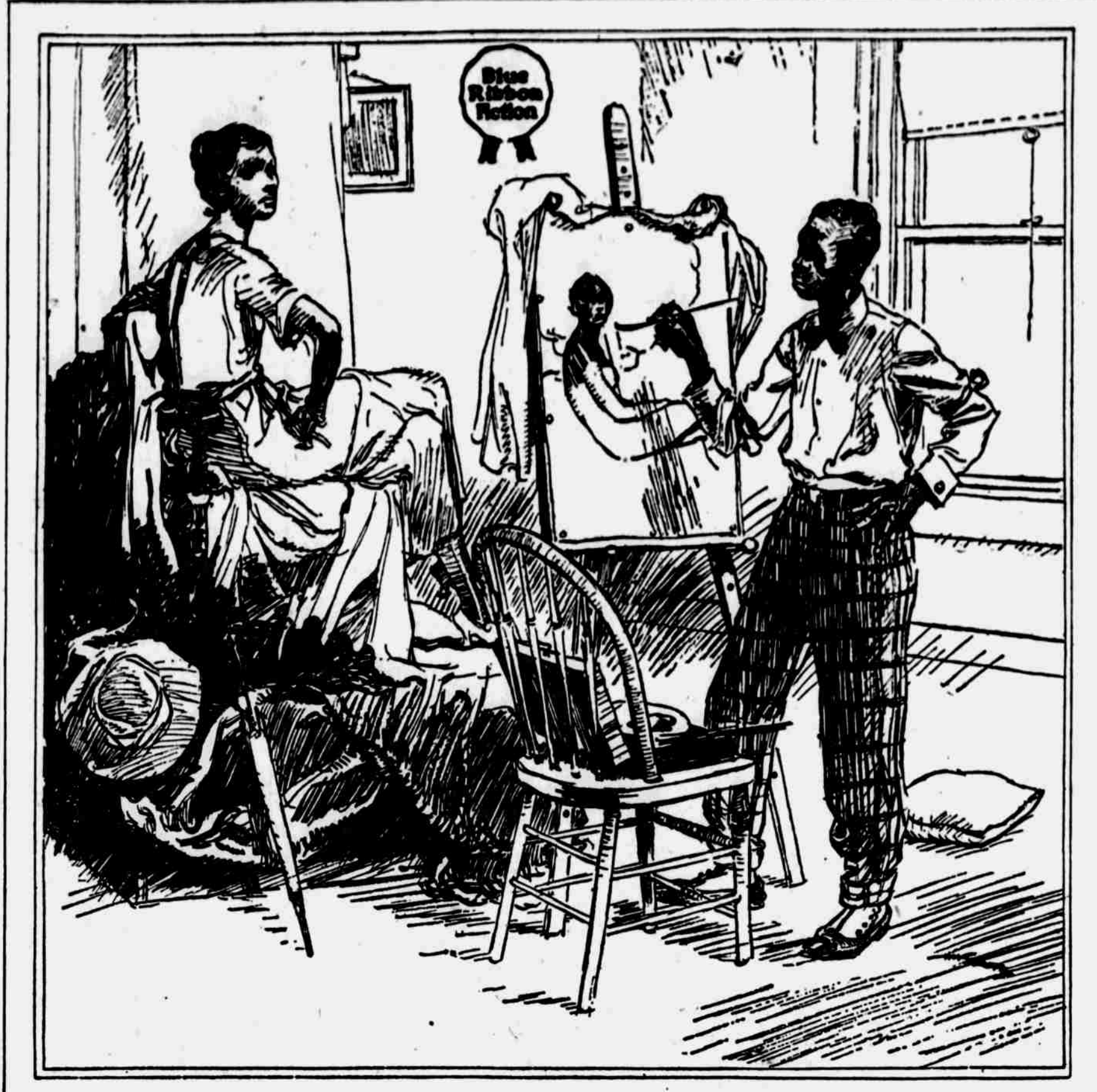
"'Yan an' this half baked imitation of a artist?"

"Which it means, Noah Lee, ain't none of yo' business, an' fu'thermo' it don't concern you none whatever. So I craves that you dephants an' leave us alone."

Noah transfixed Lyumus with a scowl. "I dephants," he said with dignity, "but I an' you is gwine meet ag'in, Mistuh Johnson. We meet ag'in, an' when we does they ain't but one of us swine leave away fum where me meets at!"

Lyumus departed early, and enroute to Callie Flukers' rooming house he turned the corner's wide and trod on the balls of his feet, all set for a sprint. He heaved a sigh of infinite relief as he attained the sanctuary of the Flukers establishment. For one night at least.

He snapped on the electric light in his room and glanced about. Then he stood in his tracks. Something was wrong! Something was radically wrong—horribly wrong! And suddenly Lyumus comprehended. He clutched wildly as



He squinted at Edner and smiled. Then, with slow but sure touches, he commenced unburning the figure of Venus.

especo's me to b'lieve you knows sumthin' 'bout cullud artists."

"I does, Miss Tarring. Fu'thermo', I claims that the bes' cullud artist which is one of my mos' bestest frien'."

"Huh! You says. What his name is?"

"Lyumus Johnson."

"How I knows you know him?"

"Well," triumphed Sis Callie, "I ain't never hearn tell of no gen'lman artist visitin' at the home of no lady if'n she didn't know him pretty good!"

Thereupon Sis Callie left in a sudden glow of glory. Straight to Lustisha Aitcherson she went to give the details of her interview with Edner. Lustisha was all a-quiver.

"A sho'-nuff, hones'-t'-Gawd artist, Sis Callie!"

"That's it, Miss Aitcherson. A regular paintin' fool."

"What he looks like?"

"We-ell," apologized the thin spinster, "he ain't so much on the eye, but he's terrible brainy in the head. An' fust time I took sight of him, I knowed he was sumthin' diff'rent."

Lustisha rose and made for her boudoir.

"Where you gwine?" inquired Sis Callie.

"To git my hat," responded Lustisha.

"Ise gwine to yo' home with you to invite this heah Mistuh Artist Johnson to deliver a address to the Uplift Sassyety at nex' Chuesday's meetin'."

En route to Miss Flukers' home the militant pair met Miss Prissilla Wattles. And as the critical eye of Lustisha catalogued the physical charms of Prissilla an idea came a-borning, and she fired a question at Sis Callie.

"This heah Lyumus Johnson—is he a ma'ed man?"

"No'm. That is, he 'lows he ain't, an' he suttinly ain't got no wives with him."

"Mm! Mawwin' Prissilla."

"Mawwin', Miss Aitcherson. Mawwin', Sis Callie. How you is this mawwin'?"

"To'able, thank the Lawd. How things is with you, Prissilla."

Prissilla giggled. "Things ain't so wuss they couldn't be wusser."

"Ain't aimin' to be ma'ed, is you?"

"Lawsy, Miss Aitcherson, they ain't no men cravin' to marry me."

Lustisha Aitcherson gave eye once again to the slim, well-gowned figure; the simple, yet effective, style; the rather sweet brown face which peeped forth from beneath the floppy white hat. Then Lustisha broke a world's record—she paid a compliment: "Reckon I know's a ready that men is fools. Edner Tarring marries to the richest cullud man in Bummin'ham—not countin' Semore Mashby, an' he don't count no-how—an' you not even close to mebbe gittin' you a man. C'mon along with us, Prissilla."

"Where to?"

Lustisha explained: explained with a wealth of graphic and intriguing detail. Prissilla thrilled to the prospect.

"A artist? A regular artist which paints pitchers?"

"You said it, honey. Does you come?"

Prissilla was smiling broadly. "They ain't nothin' couldn't keep me away now."

The ladies were seated in the parlor when Lyumus, in response to the summons of Sis Callie, descended. He extended a limp and fleshy paw to each of them and wondered vaguely what it was all about. He found himself ensconced on a battered lounge next to Miss Prissilla Wattles.

She had never met Lyumus, and now she found it impossible to resist the temptation of the fact that he was close under the wing of Lustisha Aitcherson. But Lyumus was the rage, the toast of the hour—society was revolving about his blooming personality—and so Edner and her husband went into executive session.

"If'n you was to get somebody to come heah —he wouldn't. But Edner shook her head.

"That would be do a-tall. What I is got to do is to git this heah artist feller hangin' 'roun' me and doin' what I says he should do."

Edner placed hand upon forehead. "Lemme think, Lisha. Lemme be white I thinks. He let her be white she thought. The look

was obviously a difficult one, and the helpless and adoring husband watched eagerly for symptoms. Finally they came—first a crinkling at the corners of the eyes, then a broadening of the lips as the mouth expanded into a smile—then a hearty laugh.

Edner seated herself on her husband's knee. Her face was beaming triumphantly.

"This heah Lyumus Johnson is a artist, ain't he?"

"He says."

"But he ain't done no artin' sence he gotten to Bummin'ham, has he?"

"Not none as I knows of."

"Well—why ain't he?"

"Hm! Lisha did some tall thinking. 'Guess they wa'n't nobody aroun' town which wanted to git arted."

"That's it, Lisha. You said words that time which had sense. Well—that's my idee."

"What is it?"

"Gittin' arted. Ise gwine pay this feller to paint my pitcher."

And so it was on the following afternoon—when Edner had carefully ascertained that Sis Callie had departed for the shopping district—that Lyumus had a caller.

He entertained her in the parlor of the Flukers home. He was dazzled by her sartorial elegance and considerably ill at ease. Preliminaries dispensed with, Edner got down to brass tacks.

"You ain't done no artin' sence you be'n in Bummin'ham, has you, Brother Johnson?"

"No-o-o."

"You is aimin' to, ain't you?"

"Well"—Edner heaved a deep breath—"how much cash money is you gwine cha'ge to paint my pitcher?"

For one second the universe ceased to move. Then Lyumus blinked rapidly and seized upon the words which had chiefly intrigued his interest.

"Cash money?" he echoed.

"You said it, Brother Johnson. I know yo' price is high, but I is ready to pay whichever you cha'ges."

"I ain't cha'gin' thataway," returned Lyumus honestly. "I ain't never had no paintin' jobs in Bummin'ham befo' and I craves you to set a price yo'self. Pleasin' customers is my motto."

Edner did some quick thinking. "One hundred dollars," she suggested timidly. "Fifty dollars now an' fifty when the pitcher is finished."

Lyumus extended an eager hand. "Gimme then fifty dollars, Miss Tarring. I assents."

From her purse Edner produced a long legal paper. This she unfolded unctuously, then designated a dotted line.

"Sign there, Mistuh Johnson."

Lyumus sighed. "Whaffo' I should sign a writin'?"

"This heah is a contract which was drawn up by Lawyer Evans Chew, which there ain't no better cullud lawyer in Bummin'ham, n'r neither the world. It says I is payin' you a hundred dollars to paint my pitcher, which you has to finish befo' any other pitcher in Bummin'ham—an' which I owes you another fifty dollars as soon as it's done, not countin' which I is already paid you."

"B-b-but, Miss Tarring—they ain't no writin' necessary."

"Then," said Edner positively, "if'n you can't sign my contract, I reckon I can't have myself arted."

Lyumus signed!

Edner departed triumphantly. At the corner she met Sis Callie Flukers and Prissilla Wattles. Edner flared into battle.

"I is be'n to your house, Sis Callie."

"You is be'n which?"

"To yo' house."

"If'n you be'n callin' on me?"

"I wa'n't callin' on you. I is be'n makin' a visitment with Brother Lyumus Johnson."

"Huh!" snapped Sis Callie. "He wouldn't go to see you, so you went an' called on him?"

But Edner was suspiciously unperturbed by the verbal dart. "That's it. I is be'n seein' him on a purely personal business matter."

"What soht?"

It was Edner's moment of supreme triumph. "He is gwine paint my pitcher!" she exulted.

Five minutes later a suspiciously tearful Prissilla Wattles confronted Lyumus in the parlor of the Flukers' home.

"Is it true you is gwine make an artment of Edner Tarring?"

"Uh-huh."

"How come that to be?"

"She come an' ast me would I. An' she paid cash money in advance."

Prissilla dabbed at her green tinted eyes.

"An' with all the wimmin' in Bummin'ham to pick fum, you went an' pucked the good lookin'est?"

"But, honey—"

Prissilla straightened. "They's on'y one way you c'n make things right with me, Lyumus."

"What that is, sweetness? I'd do anythin' fo' you."

"Paint my pitcher fust befo' you does here."

"Sho'ly?" Then Lyumus choked short his acquiescence and shook his head sadly.

"Cain't."

"How come not?"

"I done signed a writin' that her'n would be my fust pitcher in Bummin'ham."

Prissilla stamped and flung herself from the room. That night, meandering mournfully down Eighth street, after three curfew refusals on the part of Prissilla in answer to his supplication to call upon her, he met her face to face.

But she was not alone. Towering beside her was the massive figure of Noah Lee.

Lyumus had heard of Noah—heard much and frequently since he had commenced appropriating a majority of Prissilla's spare time to himself. Gossip was that Noah and Prissilla for years had been on the verge of an engagement and that the failure of the God of love was due entirely to Prissilla's capricious instability. Noah, so they told Lyumus, was wildly, madly, fatuously in love with the girl—and now—in her moment of pique—she had returned to his ponderous protection.

Alone in his room, the world appeared to Lyumus as a place dreard and desolate. Even the fifty dollars were as ashes to the flame of his desire. He had sold himself to art for a mess of porridge—and he was discovering that the porridge promised to prove indigestible.

It was past midnight before he slunk off into a fitful, dreamful slumber. After a pale and languid breakfast, a temporary fit of elation was squashed by the receipt of a note from Edner Tarring announcing that she would appear at his studio at 4 o'clock that afternoon for her initial sitting.

He sallied from the house, forehead furrowed a headachy thought. He turned lagging footsteps toward and eventually found himself rambling disconsolately through the shopping district of Nineteenth street. And suddenly he came to an abrupt halt before the dusty windows of a dilapidated little shop.

There was not much to attract about the institution—as such. It was filled with dirty, battered books, world chronos, second-hand cameras, disintegrating magazines. But in one corner was a muchly torn sign, rudely inscribed:

OIL COPIES OF FAMOUS PAINTINGS.  
FIVE DOLLARS EACH.

He stepped inside, and the ancient proprietor sidled forward crabwise.

"Boss man, I craves to look at some of them paintin'."

"I have only one left. It is the work of a student artist—a copy of a famous painting which is hung at the Metropolitan Museum. A fine picture. Can't be told from the original for five dollars."

"Tain't a paintin' of a lady, is it now, Boss man?"

"Of course. It represents Venus—"

"I ain't keerin' 'bout which it represents, Cap'n. If'n Venus is a lady, that's all what I asks."

"This painting—" He removed a large crayon portrait representing a genial patriarch surrounded by the enormous family he had patriarched and disclosed to view the coveted art treasure.

The eyes of Lyumus Johnson popped open,

Then they closed miserably and a spasm of agony gripped his skinny frame. He shook his head.

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The salesman argued, pleaded, enjoined. He finally cut the price in half. Lyumus stood off and inspected the nude lady carefully.

"Did that lady pose jes' like that pitcher says she done?" he inquired in awe.

"Certainly," retorted the other. "Artist's models always pose in the nude."

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"What?" smiled the shopkeeper.

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Lyumus produced two dollars and a half. "Gimme that artwork, Cap'n. We trades."

Three-quarters of an hour later, Lyumus unfolded the portrait of the immodest Venus in the sanctuary of his room. He gazed proudly upon the charms of her figure—not because of the charms, but because he had conceived a brilliant scheme whereby she was to become Edner Tarring—Edner fully and modestly clothed.

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"Which it means, Noah Lee, ain't none of yo' business, an' fu'thermo' it don't concern you none whatever. So I craves that you dephants an' leave us alone."

Noah transfixed Lyumus with a scowl. "I dephants," he said with dignity, "but I an' you is gwine meet ag'in, Mistuh Johnson. We meet ag'in, an' when we does they ain't but one of us swine leave away fum where me meets at!"

Lyumus departed early, and enroute to Callie Flukers' rooming house he turned the corner's wide and trod on the balls of his feet, all set for a sprint. He heaved a sigh of infinite relief as he attained the sanctuary of the Flukers establishment. For one night at least.

He snapped on the electric light in his room and glanced about. Then he stood in his tracks. Something was wrong! Something was radically wrong—horribly wrong! And suddenly Lyumus comprehended. He clutched wildly as