

STREET & SMITH'S

LINK KNOWN

SEPT. 1939

20c



**NONE
BUT LUCIFER**

by H. L. Gold and
L. Sprague de Camp

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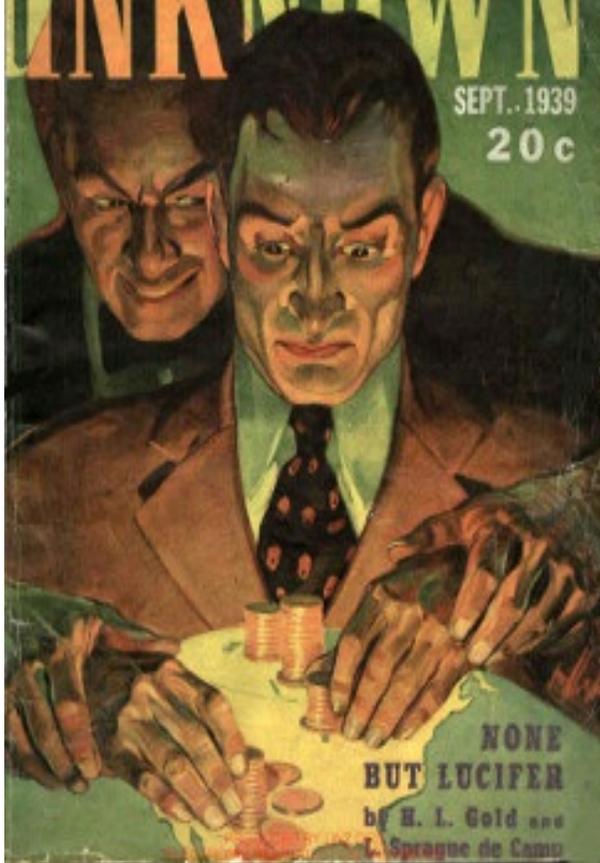
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PORTRAIT

By

Ray Cummings

A tired little artist--who had no hope for the immortality of his work--still attains--
immortality!

What the art dealer said about the big dilapidated box of oil pigments interested Ezra Todd very much.

"But even if they are as high quality oils as you say," he protested mildly, "my goodness, isn't your price rather high?"

"Oh, no, monsieur." The proprietor of the small antique shop raised his thin hands in protest. "That box came to me very highly recommended. Some of the tubes have been used a little, you notice. But who used them, or even who made them originally, of that I do not know. You are an artist, of course, monsieur?"

"Yes," Ezra Todd said. He was a small frail man, meek-looking and a little drab in a rusty black alpaca jacket and gray baggy trousers. His thin scraggly gray hair made him look older perhaps than his sixty-one years. He was smiling as he added:

"There was a time when I had hopes of being a really great, world-famous artist. The young usually feel that way, don't you think?"

"You can be that still," the art dealer declared enthusiastically, "if you use these paints. There have never been any others like them. You will find that out surely. They have a texture of smoothness, a color in every shade most extraordinary. Of the truth of that, I am assured. Fifty dollars is not much for so large a box, monsieur. You will do well to buy them. It is a real bargain."

It was a good deal of money to old Ezra Todd. But he did really need a box of paints. Working at his job all day in the Art Department of the Eureka Novelty Company left him pretty tired, but he often felt that in his spare time he ought to be painting something of his own. He had almost given that up, just drifted out of it, these latter years. And that was not right, to let hope go completely.

The El here on New York's lower East Side, roared overhead, outside the small front window and door of the musty little antique shop into which old Ezra Todd had wandered this summer afternoon on his way home from work. With his battered black felt hat crushed under his arm he stood fingering the tubes of pigments. He squeezed a little from one of them, spreading it appraisingly on his thumb-nail.

"Very well," he said at last. "I'll take them." His thin fingers fumbled into his pocket. "I can only give you ten dollars now. You will hold them for me? I'll stop for them tomorrow afternoon."

Ezra Todd took the big box of oil paints to his studio that next day. He lived alone. He had no relatives closer than his married daughter Alice, who lived in Spokane. His studio was the one room on the top floor of an old-fashioned ramshackle building--a lodginghouse of shabby respectability just off lower Fifth Avenue, on the fringe of Greenwich Village.

Todd knew Mrs. Smith, his young, widowed landlady, quite well. He had lived here for the several years during which he had worked for the Eureka Novelty Company. He showed Mrs. Smith his purchase, casually enough that afternoon. He did not tell her what he had paid for it. He knew very well she would chide him for extravagance, because she knew, of course, that he hadn't much use for it. Todd, indeed, rather thought himself that he had been extravagant, as he pantingly climbed the four flights of dingy stairs and tossed the box of paints to a litter of odds and ends in his studio corner. He was too tired to try them tonight.

As a matter of fact, it was nearly a week before he felt equal to doing any painting at home. He wanted to do something really good. This was to be a new start.

"I'll try painting a violet," he decided. "I used to be pretty good at flowers."

Anyone living much alone is apt to talk aloud. Too much silence is, in itself, a morbid thing, and there was nothing of morbidity about little Ezra Todd. He went out that evening and bought a single violet at the corner florist's. He selected it with such care to get a perfect specimen, that the florist was annoyed at this fussy little man, causing so much trouble over so small a purchase.

"Dear me, I'm awfully sorry," Todd apologized. "I'm going to paint a picture of it, so it has to be just right, you see?"

He went back, pleased with his purchase. He put the violet in a small vase, with a side light on it. He got out the old box of paints; and with a canvas only a few inches square, he went to work. Perhaps it was his renewed confidence in himself that made this an easy job. He had always wanted to do things which would give Alice a chance to be proud of her father. So she could say, "Oh yes, Ezra Todd the artist ... yes, that's my dad." And after he was gone, he could leave that as a heritage--his fame, his daughter's pride in him, living after him. That was the greatest reward of fame that could come to any father.

They were thoughts that for years had been almost dead in Todd. But to-night--and especially now as he began painting the violet--he seemed to feel them strongly. Why not? It was never too late to make a fresh start. These paints seemed very easy to work with. He had no sooner begun than he was elated at the bold freedom of his strokes. The paints were just what he needed to start him off with enthusiasm. The tubes of pigments were quite evidently old. Some of them had been used a little; they were rusted where they had been squeezed, as though perhaps a very long time had passed since anyone had touched them. But the paints certainly were in good condition.

Todd thought it a good idea not to try for any effect of composition. He painted a nondescript, shadowy background; a mere sketch of a vase--and the lone violet in complete detail, just as he saw it. The job was no trouble at all. Within an hour he leaned back, surveyed his small picture, added a few supplementary touches, and signed it with a flourish.

"Not bad," he exulted, "Not bad at all."

Then his pleased glance went from his picture, back to the living violet. He gulped, and blankly stared. The small vase which he had sketched so vaguely, stood here on the taboret before him. It was half full of water. But the little flower was gone. It hadn't fallen out; it simply wasn't here. It certainly had been here a few seconds ago, drooping a little, he remembered now. And with equal certainty, it had disappeared just as he had finished the picture.

"My goodness," Todd murmured, "if I hadn't seen that happen, I couldn't possibly believe it. It went--but where did it go?"

Then his glance turned from the empty vase, back to his tiny painting of the violet. He was startled again, because though he had felt he had done a good job, he saw now that he hadn't half realized how really good it was. Undoubtedly it was a remarkable little picture--shadowy, unobtrusive setting for the modest flower which was shyly nodding here with a sheen of side light putting a luster on the deep-bluish tones which made the simple little blossom almost a

living thing.

"Dear me," he murmured again in awe, "I certainly did a wonderful piece of work, or the paints did."

The thing dawned on him gradually, the immensity of it--the possibilities of it, so that for a long time he sat fingering the big box of old paints--enough for a good many pictures; and with his appraising, wondering gaze on the empty vase from which the little flower had vanished, and then on his painted violet, so remarkably lifelike. No wonder that violet looked so real. But would the paints work like that with something besides a violet? A kitten, for instance? Pictures of pets were always appealing.

Excitement was rising in old Ezra Todd. He would title this picture of the violet, "Modesty." It was so extraordinary, he was sure he could get it exhibited; sell it maybe, for quite a tidy sum. And when it was exhibited, it would bring orders for other pictures. Ezra Todd, with fame suddenly coming to him, felt like the man who built a better mousetrap than his neighbors and all the world tramped to his door.

Todd's mind hadn't leaped ahead like this for years; not since his youth, when Alice was a baby, and her mother, so long dead now, had so willingly suffered deprivations, sharing his dreams with him, looking forward to that glorious future of fame and wealth which had never come.

Or was he mistaken that this painted violet looked so real, so extraordinarily lifelike that anyone who saw it would acclaim him a great artist? He'd show it, for a start, to Mrs. Smith. With the possibilities of his discovery so vividly before him, he took the tiny canvas and trudged downstairs with it.

"Oh, Mrs. Smith, let me show you what I just painted. Tell me what you think."

Mrs. Smith, a good-looking widow of thirty-five, was in her kitchen ironing. She was startled as the excited Todd so breathlessly burst in on her.

"Good heavens, Mr. Todd, what's the matter?" she gasped.

"Eh? Why, nothing at all's the matter. I mean, I've just painted something that seems rather good. What do you think?"

He stood eying her expectantly as she took the small-mounted canvas. Mrs. Smith was no judge of art, of course, but she couldn't miss seeing that the nodding little blossom was startlingly realistic.

"Why, yes," she agreed. "That looks fine. It certainly does, doesn't it?"

He had been holding his breath. "It seems so to me," he said. And then he let his enthusiasm come out. "I'm going to get this exhibited, Mrs. Smith. I'll get write-ups and I'll do others. Why, I can sell this little one-hour job for quite a bit maybe. If I do, I'll certainly quit that miserable work at Eureka."

"Well, that's fine, Mr. Todd. You certainly deserve it." She smiled encouragingly and affectionately at the excited little Todd. She had always liked him, admired the way uncomplainingly he had trudged daily to his work downtown which she knew must be so uncongenial to him. Mrs. Smith had known Alice, Todd's married daughter, some years ago in

Spokane.

"Alice will be proud of you when she hears about this, won't she?" Mrs. Smith added.

That seemed to startle him. "Eh? Why yes, so she will. I'll be glad of that." He stared at her, faintly smiling. She had never seen his thin, gentle face look quite so pleased, in all the years she had known him. "You know," he said, "one of the nicest things about being famous is that those you love can be proud of you. Well, thanks a lot, Mrs. Smith."

He took his little picture and trudged back upstairs.

To Mrs. Smith, there was, of course, nothing momentous about that evening when old Mr. Todd showed her his painting of the violet. The rooming house, with only Annie, her one hired girl to help her, kept Mrs. Smith pretty busy. She didn't see Mr. Todd that next day, but in the middle of the evening he came bustling into her ground floor living room. Annie went home at night. Mrs. Smith was alone, knitting a tiny sweater for her niece who was expecting a baby in the fall.

"Look what I bought," Todd announced.

In his arms he was holding a small blue-gray kitten. It had a long thick tail, long lustrous fur so that it wasn't much more than a puffball.

"I got him from the pet shop over on Third Avenue," Todd said. "Five dollars. My goodness, isn't he a beauty?"

"Why yes, Mr. Todd, that's very nice." Mrs. Smith tweaked the kitten's nose. She was mildly surprised. It was rather unusual for a man living alone to want a kitten for a pet.

"I'm going to paint his picture," Todd explained.

Mrs. Smith was not a particularly discerning woman. She didn't notice that though old Ezra Todd's lips were casually smiling, his mild blue eyes were glowing with excitement. She went back to her knitting presently, and he trudged upstairs with his kitten. She rather expected that he might come down again later on to show her the start of his picture, which he had said he was going to work on right away. But he didn't. And the next morning he didn't go to his office at the Eureka Novelty Company. And he wouldn't let Annie in to clean up his room. He just called out that he was too busy working.

Mrs. Smith never saw that kitten again. It was, in fact, two days more before she saw Mr. Todd. Then she met him in the hall.

"How is your picture getting on?" she asked.

"Eh? My picture? Why--"

"The picture of your kitten. Did you paint it?"

"Oh ... yes, of course I did. I finished it last night. Would you want to see it, Mrs. Smith? That's very kind of you to be interested."

He brought it down to her. Even to Mrs. Smith's untrained eye, it was an astonishing painting. The fluffy blue-gray kitten lying curled up on its shadowy blue cushion was so absolutely lifelike that you would almost think you heard it purring.

"It's wonderful," she said at last. "I declare, Mr. Todd, I never saw anything like it before."

"I showed it to a dealer up on Madison Avenue," he said quietly. "It does seem to be good. He's going to put it in his window. Nine hundred dollars. And he said he felt sure we'd sell it in a week."

Mrs. Smith could appreciate that the prospect of getting nine hundred dollars would excite old Mr. Todd. He had always been so sorry that he couldn't send money to his daughter who had three children now and whose husband was an underpaid mechanic. And Mr. Todd obviously was excited. His eyes were sparkling, and his usually pale, thin cheeks had spots of red in them.

"I think I shall paint a dog next," he said. "I'm going out now to see about getting one. A wire-haired pup. That would be good, wouldn't it? Everybody likes pictures of pets."

"How's the kitten getting along?" she asked. "Annie said she couldn't find it when she cleaned while you were out this afternoon. She thought it might be hiding in your closet. I told her she must be careful. I remember once my niece Gracie and I had a kitten, and the first day or two, every time we left the front door open--"

"Oh, the kitten?" He turned, shuffling his feet in the dim doorway. "I sent it away," he said.

He went back upstairs. He had quite evidently given up his position at the Eureka Novelty Company. Mrs. Smith hoped that he hadn't made an error, doing that prematurely. There was no doubt but that he was working hard upstairs in his studio. And it proved that he was justified in leaving Eureka, because within a few days he came in and casually tossed a check onto her kitchen table.

"How does that look to you, Mrs. Smith? You can imagine how good it looks to me."

It was the Madison Avenue art dealer's check for six hundred and seventy-five dollars.

"Nine hundred, less his twenty-five percent commission," Todd explained. "Dear me, he was very enthusiastic. That was for the kitten," he added.

"Why, that's wonderful, Mr. Todd."

"And I sold the violet for fifty."

"There's no doubt you'll get rich," she said. "I'm so pleased for you. I always felt somehow that you'd never had the right chance."

He stared at her. "Well, I guess that's right," he said. "My pictures are creating a furor, Mrs. Smith. Why wouldn't they?" He was smiling a curious, twisted smile. He said it deprecatingly. There could never be anything of the braggart about little Mr. Todd, even now with his sudden success. "I've got a dozen orders from that art dealer's rich customers," he added. "Did I show you my picture of the wire-haired pup? Wait, I'll go get it. I've promised to deliver it tomorrow."

And now, with this sudden success, he apparently was overdoing things. He seemed to be painting all day, and perhaps a good part of the night. Several times she had seen him bringing in bouquets of flowers, which evidently he was using for models. She never saw him take any of them out. Annie when she cleaned, never found any of them. And his interest in flowers now seemed to be gone.

"Here you are, Mrs. Smith. What do you think of this one?"

His big picture of the wire-haired pup, as he held it before him with her overhead kitchen light on it, fairly took Mrs. Smith's breath away.

"Why ... that's uncanny," she gasped.

His face was behind the big canvas. He shuffled his feet as though her words had startled him. "Is it?" he said. "Yes, he does look real, doesn't he? I really think I did a good job on this one."

The perky little dog, sitting on his haunches with ears erect, his head cocked quizzically sidewise, seemed so real that instinctively Mrs. Smith had reached out to pet him.

"You've got real genius," she said at last. She was awed now. "And you've just discovered it."

He put the canvas down. "Genius?" he said. "Yes, I suppose you would naturally call it that. I've got a big thing in this, Mrs. Smith." His pinched cheeks were mottled red with his excitement. "But I mustn't let anything go wrong. I had an order from a customer to come out to his country estate and paint his prize-winning stallion. Three thousand dollars, I guess that would have paid me."

"Would have? Why, aren't you going, Mr. Todd?"

He had started back upstairs. He paused in the doorway. "No," he said. "No, I don't think I'll bother with it. I've got plenty of things I want to do here." Then abruptly from the doorway, he added:

"I don't believe I'm going to sell anything more just now, Mrs. Smith."

"Not sell them?"

"No, not right away. Because you see ... well, it's sort of hard to explain it--" His voice was tense, but gentle and very earnest. "You see, it might be I won't have an unlimited number of good pictures like these. And generally they're worth much more after"--he checked himself suddenly--"after time passes," he amended. "After the artist gets famous. So I'm going to keep them for Alice. I don't need much money for myself, you know. I'm painting a pair of Irish setters tomorrow," he added, with renewed enthusiasm in his voice. "And I'm arranging to get a prize-winning great Dane from a pet shop downtown."

Quite evidently he rented his models. Mrs. Smith sometimes saw him bringing them in. But he wouldn't ever let Annie do his room while he was working on a picture, and the models were always gone by the time she got up to clean.

The days passed, and there came a period when Mrs. Smith didn't see Ezra Todd at all, except once or twice from her window as he went in and out. He didn't seem to be painting now. He had brought in the Irish setters and the great Dane, but nothing more after that. She began wondering why he didn't offer to show her his pictures any more. Obviously he didn't want to talk about his work. Yet, for most of his time he was secluded in his studio. He wouldn't let Annie in at all now; he always called out that he was too busy. Once, while he was out one afternoon, Mrs. Smith sent the girl up to clean.

"Door's locked," Annie announced, disgruntled as she came back. "He's got a new padlock on the outside of it. Don't know what's got into him these days. He was plumb nasty this mornin' ... called out for me to go away an' stay away. That ain't like him. He's always been such a kind old gentleman. Maybe he's sick."

That night, Mrs. Smith, thinking about it, got herself really worried. Old Mr. Todd had come in, early in the evening. Obviously avoiding her, he had gone upstairs. All evening she sat by the hall door of her sitting room, hoping that he would come downstairs. But he didn't. Far beyond her usual bedtime she sat; and then with sudden decision she went upstairs. Mr. Todd's door was closed. She listened a moment. She was about to turn away, thinking he must be asleep, when she heard the rasp of his chair as though he had shoved it on the bare studio floor.

Then she heard his footstep, and the words: "This way, no one will ever know. And Alice will be so proud of me ... her father ... immortal--"

Then his chair clattered as though he had knocked it over; and there was another sound which Mrs. Smith never could describe--a sound like something happening which never had happened before. Mrs. Smith in another minute was pounding on the locked door; then she was calling in a panic. That brought two or three of the lodgers into the hall a flight down.

The men couldn't break down the door; then one of them went out and got a policeman and another went into the cellar and came back with a length of heavy pipe. The policeman broke open the door.

There was no real disorder in old Ezra Todd's studio. Its large floodlight bulb was lighted, with a diffusing screen of cheesecloth standing before it. The only disorder was a litter of unwashed dishes in the tiny kitchenette. Against the wall, his canvases were neatly stacked. A small overturned chair was near his big easel, which had a taboret nearby that held his palette and brushes. The ventilating panels of the small skylight were closed and locked on the inside. So was the single window in his small adjoining bathroom.

No one heeded the big dilapidated box of old paints, the tubes of which were all squeezed dry now--paints which had done so well, but with which old Ezra Todd could do no more.

"You say you heard him in here?" the policeman demanded skeptically, after he had poked around. "Well, ma'am, he sure ain't here now."

Then Mrs. Smith saw the big mirror which old Ezra Todd had evidently hung recently on the wall, just behind the easel to one side. And she saw the big painted canvas on the easel--the life-size portrait of a meek, gentle-looking, gray-haired little man, with a faint smile of triumph on his face. Its flowing signature, "Ezra Todd," was very prominent and legible.

"That's him," one of the lodgers said to the policeman. "Why, good Lord, that's the most wonderful self-portrait I've ever seen. He has real genius, hasn't he? Why that picture alone will make his name immortal."

"Well, if he was in here, it's sure queer how he got out," the policeman declared. "But anyways, he did. An' if you folks don't need me any more, guess I'll be goin'!"

He left, disgruntled at having been summoned on a matter of no importance.

[The end of *Portrait* by Ray Cummings]