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BELL SISTERS BUILDING

A PICTURE FIND

By CORA HATHORNE SYKES

I manifested a taste for art when I was a little boy, taking more comfort in drawing pictures on my slate than doing sums on it. As I grew older I became ambitious to do something better, and asked my father to allow me a few drawing lessons. He refused, saying he would not encourage me in a task that would wreck my future if I gave way to it.

When it became time for me to choose an occupation I wished to become an artist, but my parents made such an ado over the matter that I abandoned the plan and accepted a clerkship in a grocery house. But if I couldn't make pictures I could at least look at pictures. And it so happened that I lived in a metropolis where the best works of art are to be seen. I read the art journals and was on the lookout for any announcements of the changing hands of the great pictures of the world, especially those coming to America.

I made no progress at business. All I did in a business way bored me. It was simple drudgery, and drudgery is incompatible with an artistic temperament. Instead of doing my work I sketched the office boys, the cat, anything that was sketchable. After awhile I was informed by my employers that they had no further need for my services.

My father, after a scene, secured another place for me and on entering upon it I promised to try to do better. But my heart was not in my work, and I have no faith in people being able to do continuously what they take no interest in. If they succeed in doing it they will not do it well. I believe that persons only do well what they like and are fitted to do; that eminently successful persons are successful in doing that which other people cannot do, or do as well.

One day after getting away from the work I hated after business hours I was passing a building that was being torn down. A workman had taken a roll of canvas from an old bricked up chimney and was unrolling it. I stopped and saw him reveal a dirty painting. I stepped up to where he stood and looked over his shoulder. I was astonished to see a work which, though dingy in the extreme, reminded me of the work of one of the great masters who flourished in the latter part of the fifteenth century. I looked in the corner where the name should be, but the dirt was too thick; no name was visible.

"What will you take for your find?" I asked the workman.

"Oh, I don't suppose it is worth anything," he said. "Any loose change you have in your pocket."

"I'm as poor as you are," I said, "but I know some picture dealers, and if you will let me have this one I will see what I can sell it for and divide with you." The man looked me in the face, handed me the painting and returned to work.

"Give me your address," I said.

He did so, and I went away with his find. Instead of taking it directly to picture dealers I carried it to my room, and sitting down before it, looked at it a long while. The more I studied it the more I was impressed with its resemblance to the works of the artist I have referred to. The same evening I went to a library where engravings of many pictures of the old masters were kept in portfolios and familiarized myself anew with the style of this particular artist. The more I looked at his pictures the more I believed that the find was by him. Could it be possible that it had been stolen?

I set the librarian to hunting for a book on stolen pictures, but though he was successful in finding such a book, it contained no reference to the laborer's find. I wished to clean the picture, but did not know how to do so and was afraid to leave it with any picture dealer for the purpose lest the name be uncovered, and if it were as I suspected, the painting's value would be discovered and I be hauled out of it.

One day I told my father that I had left the place he had secured for me and had gone to work in a picture and frame shop. He was in despair about me, and this move capped the climax.

In the shop where I worked I learned to clean pictures. As soon as I became sufficiently expert to clean a picture I took the materials for doing so to my home and got the dirt off the corner where the name of the artist is usually placed. What was my delight to see the name of the artist who I believed had done the work.

Believing the picture to have been stolen I consulted an expert dealer, asking him if he could find a record of one of the artist's pictures having been stolen. He found a book in which the artist had been written up with other painters and a statement that in the early part of the nineteenth century one of his paintings belonging to a nobleman in England had been cut from its frame and taken away.

I succeeded in time in opening a correspondence with the descendants of the owner and sent them a photograph of the painting.

This was before enormous prices were paid for certain paintings, but my correspondents agreed that if the painting was the one they had lost they would pay me \$20,000 for it. It turned out to be the identical picture, and I pocketed \$10,000, giving the finder an equal amount.

I am now a prominent art dealer. My find has since sold for \$20,000.



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THE EVENING NEWS

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