

The Little Detectives **and** *The Case of the Sirloin Steak that Disappeared*

By Catalina Calle Bourdeau



THE OARSMEN'S LUNCH

(1880 - 1881)



This painting is in Washington, DC and belongs to the Phillips Collection. This famous scene shows people at the "Restaurant de la Maison Fournaise in Chatou on the bank of the Seine River.



“This must be the painting called 'The Oarsmen's Lunch' by Pierre-Auguste Renoir », Jean Luc said looking at the booklet that described the painting.

“What are oarsmen?” asked Jean-Luc.

“It's a group of boatmen,” his sister answered.

“And what are boatmen?” Jean-Luc asked, looking a little lost.

“Boatmen are the men who row boats that transport people from one side of the river to the other”, replied his sister Lucille.

“How come you know so much?” asked Jean-Luc.

“I read a lot.”, She replied. “When was it painted?”

“From 1880 to 1881”, Jean-Luc said, “It is more than 100 years old”. “Grandma Danielle says that life was more peaceful during her grandparents' time. She said that they had no television or video games but that people still knew how to have fun”.

“Life without video games...” Jean-Luc thought a few seconds and then said, “No, I can't imagine it. How could they have fun without video games?”

“Well, take a look at the people in the painting”, she suggested. “It looks like everyone is having fun”.

The two children continued looking at the painting for a few minutes until Jean-Luc pointed to a person in the painting and shouted enthusiastically:

“I knew that not all of them could be happy without video games. Look at her ! The lady in the back of the painting doesn't seem to be having fun”.

Lucile looked towards the lady who appeared to be very worried about something.

“That's true,” said Lucile, “I wonder what happened to her”.

“Why don't we ask her”, suggested Jean-Luc.

“Do you think that Mr. Washington Phillips will scold us if we bother the people in his painting?”, asked Lucile a bit frightened. “Maybe he won't like it if they speak with someone from outside the painting. It is like Dad always tells us:

“Never speak with strangers”.

“Maybe you're right”, replied Jean-Luc disappointed, but immediately his face lit up with a wonderful idea.

“Maybe they should not speak with children from outside of the painting, but I'll bet they would speak with detectives!”

“Of course!”, exclaimed Lucile jumping with excitement. “It's time for detectives”.

Her brother accompanied her saying “The Little Detectives!”

Holding a chocolate pipe in his left hand, Jean-Luc put on his detective coat and hat; dressed as he always imagined a detective and Lucile stood next to him carrying her notepad and her magnifying glass since who could be a detective without a good magnifying glass?

The Durand children were armed and ready for action.



“Very well, Miss Lucile”, said Jean-Luc in his best detective voice, “let's ask this lady just what her problem is. “

“I agree, Detective Durand”, she replied, determined and ready to take notes with her ballpoint pen with a strawberry aroma.

The two children came closer to the painting that suddenly seemed much larger than before because all the people in it seemed to be life size.

The painting no longer looked like a simple oil painting, but more like a window where all the people moved, conversed and roared with laughter from time to time as if a member of the group had told a good Joke.



The noon hot rays of the sun brightened The Little Detectives' faces and a soft breeze brought near the nice smells of food, which made Jean-Luc's stomach growl.

When he tried to take a grape from the nearest table, however, Jean-Luc touched a transparent barrier that seemed to be made of glass.

“It isn't fair. The smell of that ham is making me hungry”, grumbled Detective Durand, crossing his arms.

“Brother, you are not very smart”, Lucile said laughingly. “Can't you see that there is no place for us in the painting? With so many people, I cannot imagine how the waiters can go from table to table to serve the food.

“The owners of this restaurant probably have a lot of money if their restaurant is always this full”.

“There is a lady”, Jean-Luc pointed behind the man in the white woolen jacket.

“Miss Lucile, keep your notebook ready”.

“Yes, Detective Durand”.

“I do not think she sees me from here”, observed Jean-Luc jumping and waving his hand to attract the attention of the lady with the brown hat.



“I’ve got an idea”, said Lucile moving away from the painting and, before her brother realized it, she returned with a three step stepladder.

It was probably the same one that Mr. Phillips' maid used to dust the paintings when she cleaned the Art Gallery.

“Where did you find that?”, asked her brother.

“It was at the end of the corridor. I saw it when we came in”, replied

Lucile, placing the stepladder near the right side of the painting.

“You should be able to see now”.



“Thank you, Miss Lucile. You are very competent.”

“Oh, you're welcome, Detective Durand.”

“Excuse me, Madam, I am Detective Jean-Luc Durand and this is my

Assistant, Miss Lucile”, he said in a very refined manner with his chocolate pipe in hand, “We were wondering what could be bothering you.

Is there something that we can do for you?”

“Thank you, Detective Durand. The truth of the matter is that I have a small problem”, said the lady with the brown hat. “I have just received the bill for a lunch which I never received. These two men have been sitting at the same table and they can corroborate what I am saying”.

Jean-Luc moved closer to his sister and whispered in her ear, “Corro... what..?”

“Corroborate, dear brother”, replied Lucile in a whisper, “That means that they are witnesses. They saw what really happened”.

Jean-Luc nodded. “Now I understand. Could I see the bill?”, he asked the lady.

The lady handed him the paper and it passed through the invisible barrier that separated them with no problem at all.

After examining the bill which included a medium-rare cooked sirloin steak, a glass of red wine, and a piece of lemon pie, Jean-Luc turned to the man with the black hat who was consoling the lady.

“What do you say to this, Sir? Perhaps you saw that the lady was served a sirloin steak?”

“That's right”, the man said convincingly. “I saw the waiter bring the plate”.

“I also saw him”, interrupted the man sitting next to him, dressed in a striped shirt and a straw hat. “He brought the sirloin steak when he brought my fish cooked in garlic. He put both plates on the table”.

“You are an oarsman, aren't you?”, asked Lucile taking notes in her notebook.

“That's right. I come to the “La Fournaise” almost every day at lunch time. I know all the waiters and I know that Maurice would never charge for something that he did not serve.”

“How did you know that this man was an oarsman?”, Jean-Luc asked his sister.

“Look at the other persons in the painting”, replied Lucile. “There are three oarsmen in all. Can you find the other two?”

Jean-Luc put his chocolate pipe in his mouth and observed the painting carefully.

“Now I see them”, he exclaimed. “The other two are wearing white shirts and straw hats. One of them is there leaning on the railing and the other has his chair turned around and is speaking with the ladies at the table across from his”.

“Good observation, Mr. Detective”, Lucile congratulated him.





“But I did not see any waiter with my sirloin steak“, grumbled the lady with the brown hat, “And I do not plan on paying for it”.

“Very well”, Lucile said, “We are going to question some other people and we will get to the bottom of this matter”.

“We'll be right back”, Jean-Luc said, “Do not worry, Madam, we are going to find your sirloin steak”.

The Little Detectives moved towards the center of the painting. In the background they saw a well dressed man, wearing a top hat, talking with a young man.

Jean-Luc dragged the ladder to the center of the scene and to be able to get closer to his next witnesses, he climbed up to the frame of the painting, just above the two persons.

His sister climbed up the ladder to the last step in order to be next to the two men.

“Excuse me, Gentlemen”, interrupted Lucile, “We are detectives and we are investigating the disappearance of a sirloin steak that belonged to the lady with the brown hat. May we ask you a few questions?”

“Of course”, replied the man wearing a top hat. Allow me to present myself. My name is Charles Ephrussi, I am a banker and this is my Assistant, Ferdinand.”

“Glad to meet you. My name is Jean-Luc and this is my sister, Lucile”.

“Did you see a waiter bring the sirloin steak in question to the lady?”, asked Lucile.

“No, I'm very sorry. I was talking about my finances with my Assistant”, replied the banker. “I did not see any sirloin steak”.

“All right”, Lucile said, a bit disappointed, “thank you, anyway”.

“I don't know”, Jean-Luc said, climbing down from the frame and moving closer to his sister. “That man looks suspicious”.

“No, I don't think so, Detective Durand. This man is a banker and if you look at how he is dressed, you can see that he has money. If he wanted a sirloin steak, he would not have to steal it.

The two children continued towards the table next to the two gentlemen.

Three people were seated at the table. A man with a derby was talking in a very animated manner to a young lady leaning on the railing, who was wearing a dress with a sailor neck and a straw hat. Two other persons, a lady with a flower in her bonnet and a boy next to her, were paying close attention to the conversation.



“Excuse me, Miss”, Lucile said to the lady wearing the bonnet, who was sipping a glass of red wine. “My brother and I are investigating what happened to the lady's sirloin steak at the table next to yours”.

“Oh, yes”, she replied, “I saw the waiter when he brought the steak. The lady was not there when he brought her order”.

“Do you know where she went?” asked Jean-Luc while his sister took notes of everything said.

“She had to go to powder her nose”, said the young lady leaning on the railing.



“To powder her nose?” asked Jean-Luc surprised. “Why would she go to powder her nose before eating?”

His sister moved close to Jean-Luc to whisper something in his ear.

“That means that she had to go to the bathroom.”

“Oh, now I see. Woman talk... That explains why I didn't understand.”

“That is why she didn't see the waiter”, Lucile said.

“What happened after that?” she asked the lady wearing the bonnet.

“I have no idea. I started talking with Bernard and when I looked towards the table again, the sirloin steak was no longer on the plate”.

“Maybe it wasn't cooked as the lady had requested and the waiter had to take it back to the kitchen”, suggested the man with the derby who still had his back turned, in order to see the lady leaning on the railing. “I am Mr. Maggiolo. Maybe you know me? I am a journalist and I know that often stories are less complicated than they appear. I do not think it is necessary to blame anyone for having stolen a sirloin steak.”

“But if the waiter took the sirloin steak back to the kitchen, would he not have taken the plate also?”, Bernard asked.

“We can ask Ellen Andrée, the actress dressed in blue velvet at the next table”, said the young lady leaning on the railing. She was served by the same waiter who brought the sirloin steak to the lady”.

“Thank you, Miss...”. It was an awkward moment. Lucile did not know the name of the lady who had given them such good information.

“I am Alphonsine Fournaise. My father owns this restaurant”.

“Thanks a lot, Miss Fournaise”.





“Wow, look how the people at this table are enjoying their lunch!” Jean-Luc said looking at all the wine bottles, glasses, plates, bowls of fruit and even the barrel on the next table.

A man dressed like an oarsman was seating on the railing, next to the young lady with the yellow hat. Jean-Luc thought that with all those flowers on that hat it looked like she had a vase on her head. The man dressed like an oarsman motioned to the two children to come closer to him.

“I see that you were speaking with my daughter, Alphonsine”, he said, “I also saw you speaking with the people at the other two tables and with Ephussi, the banker. I am Alphonse, the owner of this restaurant. If there has been a problem, you should have told me about it first. What has happened?”

“We are sorry, Mr. Fournaise”, said Lucile ashamed. “We didn't know that you were the owner. What happened is that the lady at the table in the back of the restaurant got a bill for a sirloin steak that she never ate. The young lady at the same table told us that the lady had gone to the bathroom and the waiter had brought her sirloin steak, but when she came back, the steak had disappeared.

And now the lady does not think that she should pay for something she did not eat. My brother and I are trying to solve this case”.

"I would like to help you but I just arrived. You can ask my good friend, Gustave Caillebotte, the man sitting there between François, another oarsman, and Ellen, the Actress. They should know something".

"Thank you, Sir", said Jean-Luc, "We will do that".

"Mr Caillebotte, may we ask you and your friends some questions?" asked Jean-Luc.

"Naturally, children, come closer."

The two children climbed down the ladder and walked to the extreme right side of the painting.

"We are studying the disappearance of a sirloin steak", said Lucile.

"The lady at the table behind yours lost it. One minute it was on her plate and the next minute it was no longer there. What can you tell us about that?"

"I don't know", replied Gustave with a smile. "I haven't seen any sirloin steak running around here. Have you seen anything, Ellen?"

"Let me see", said Ellen pensively, but also with a smile on her lips. "Walking steaks..., walking sirloins...no I don't think so. Although I did see an apple jumping out of this bowl which then rolled all around on the table. François is a hero. He was able to catch the apple before it jumped off the table.

We could say that he saved the apple's life!"



All three of them burst out laughing.

“Great”, thought Jean-Luc sarcastically, and from the expression on his sister's face, he knew that she was thinking the same thing.

“Adults don't take us seriously. It's always like that.”

The oarsman named François stopped when he saw the expression on the the children's faces.

“Oh, come on, don't pay any attention to those two. They've had too much wine. I believe you Detectives. What's more, I know what happened to the famous sirloin steak”.

“Seriously?” asked Jean-Luc astonished. “What did happen to it?”

“I think that you should ask one last person. Well, not exactly a person, rather ask that shaggy dog sitting on the table next to his master, Miss Aline Charigot.”



“It can't be, Jean-Luc”, exclaimed Lucile. “How could we have missed it?”

The two children ran to the left side of the painting to stand near the lady with the yellow hat full of flowers.

“You are the guilty one!”, said Jean-Luc pointing at the puppy.

“Miss Charigot”, said Lucile, “I am sorry to tell you that your pet is a criminal. Your puppy stole that lady's sirloin steak”.

And Lucile pointed to the lady with the brown hat.

“That explains it”. Aline picked up her puppy in her hands and lifted it up to speak directly in its eyes. “You little rascal! Look what you've done. No wonder you are licking your chops that way. You are so fat and so heavy that I can hardly lift you.” The lady looked at the children sadly.

“Children, I am so sorry. My little 'mouton' and I are going to apologize to that lady right now. Please tell Alphonse that I will pay the lady's bill.”

“Of course we will”, replied Lucile.



“Well, Miss Lucile, it seems that we have solved another case”.

“We always do, Detective Durand”.

“Because nothing is too hard for”, and , the two children sang out in chorus,

“The Little Detectives!”.





As a reward for all their help (and as she no longer had to pay for her own lunch), the lady with the brown hat invited the two children to have lunch with her. She finally got her so desired sirloin steak,

Jean-Luc ate veal chops and Lucile ate roasted chicken.

Their Uncle, a good friend of Mr. Phillips, the owner of the painting collection, was very surprised when he called the two children to have lunch with him but they hid in the first place they could find. They said that they could not eat another bite and that they were so full that they thought they were going to burst. They tried playing a game of chess but they were so full that they fell asleep side by side.





This copy of the painting
«The Oarsmen's Lunch» by Pierre-Auguste Renoir
was made in 2007
by
Catalina Calle Bourdeau

Pierre-Auguste Renoir

(1841-1919)



A French impressionist painter, considered one of the greatest independent artists of his time, Renoir is famous for the harmony of his lines, the brilliance of his color, and the charm of his many various pictorial themes. Unlike other Impressionists who preferred landscapes, what interested him most were individual or group portraits.

Renoir was born in Limoges, France on February 25, 1841. As a child, he worked decorating porcelains in a factory in Paris. At 17 years of age, he copied paintings onto fans, lampshades and venetian blinds. After entering the Academy of Fine Arts in 1862, Renoir enrolled in the academy of the Swiss painter Charles Gabriel Gleyre. In 1864, Renoir exhibited his works for the first time in Paris but he was not truly recognized until 1874 at the first exposition of the new Impressionist School painters.

Renoir strengthened his reputation with an individual exposition at Duran-Ruel Gallery in Paris in 1883. Between 1884 and 1887, he painted a series of group nudes known as *The Bathers*. During the last 20 years of his life, he suffered from arthritis. Notwithstanding the fact that he had lost the free movement in his hands, he continued working with a paintbrush tied to his arm. Renoir died on December 3, 1919 in Cagnes, a city in the South of France.

**THE LITTLE DETECTIVES
And
THE CASE OF THE SIRLOIN STEAK THAT DISAPPEARED**

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WITH GRATITUDE

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Translator's remark. The reader will notice that I used the name "The Oarsmen's Lunch", for this translation. I fully recognize that one can find the same painting on different English language websites with three different names, i.e. **THE OARSMEN'S LUNCH, THE OARSMEN'S BREAKFAST, and THE BOATING PARTY LUNCH.**

