**Cherchez la femme**

O. Henry

Robbins, reporter for the *Picayune*, and Dumars, of *L’Abeille*—the old French newspaper that has buzzed for nearly a century—were good friends, well proven by years of ups and downs together. They were seated where they had a habit of meeting—in the little, Creole-haunted café of Madame Tibault, in Dumaine Street. If you know the place, you will experience a thrill of pleasure in recalling it to mind. It is small and dark, with six little polished tables, at which you may sit and drink the best coffee in New Orleans, and concoctions of absinthe equal to Sazerac’s best. Madame Tibault, fat and indulgent, presides at the desk, and takes your money. Nicolette and Mémé, madame’s nieces, in charming bib aprons, bring the desirable beverages.

Dumars, with true Creole luxury, was sipping his absinthe, with half-closed eyes, in a swirl of cigarette smoke. Robbins was looking over the morning *Pic.*, detecting, as young reporters will, the gross blunders in the make-up, and the envious blue-pencilling his own stuff had received. This item, in the advertising columns, caught his eye, and with an exclamation of sudden interest he read it aloud to his friend.

Public Auction.—At three o’clock this afternoon there will be sold to the highest bidder all the common property of the Little Sisters of Samaria, at the home of the Sisterhood, in Bonhomme Street. The sale will dispose of the building, ground, and the complete furnishings of the house and chapel, without reserve.

This notice stirred the two friends to a reminiscent talk concerning an episode in their journalistic career that had occurred about two years before. They recalled the incidents, went over the old theories, and discussed it anew from the different perspective time had brought.

There were no other customers in the café. Madame’s fine ear had caught the line of their talk, and she came over to their table—for had it not been her lost money—her vanished twenty thousand dollars—that had set the whole matter going?

The three took up the long-abandoned mystery, threshing over the old, dry chaff of it. It was in the chapel of this house of the Little Sisters of Samaria that Robbins and Dumars had stood during that eager, fruitless news search of theirs, and looked upon the gilded statue of the Virgin.

“Thass so, boys,” said madame, summing up. “Thass ver’ wicked man, M’sieur Morin. Everybody shall be cert’ he steal those money I plaze in his hand for keep safe. Yes. He’s boun’ spend that money, somehow.” Madame turned a broad and contemplative smile upon Dumars. “I ond’stand you, M’sieur Dumars, those day you come ask fo’ tell ev’ything I know ‘bout M’sieur Morin. Ah! yes, I know most time when those men lose money you say ‘*Cherchez la femme* ‘—there is somewhere the woman. But not for M’sieur Morin. No, boys. Before he shall die, he is like one saint. You might’s well, M’sieur Dumars, go try find those money in those statue of Virgin Mary that M’sieur Morin present at those *p’tite surs*, as try find one *femme*.”

At Madame Tibault’s last words, Robbins started slightly and cast a keen, sidelong glance at Dumars. The Creole sat, unmoved, dreamily watching the spirals of his cigarette smoke.

It was then nine o’clock in the morning and, a few minutes later, the two friends separated, going different ways to their day’s duties. And now follows the brief story of Madame Tibault’s vanished thousands:

New Orleans will readily recall to mind the circumstances attendant upon the death of Mr. Gaspard Morin, in that city. Mr. Morin was an artistic goldsmith and jeweller in the old French Quarter, and a man held in the highest esteem. He belonged to one of the oldest French families, and was of some distinction as an antiquary and historian. He was a bachelor, about fifty years of age. He lived in quiet comfort, at one of those rare old hostelries in Royal Street. He was found in his rooms, one morning, dead from unknown causes.

When his affairs came to be looked into, it was found that he was practically insolvent, his stock of goods and personal property barely—but nearly enough to free him from censure—covering his liabilities. Following came the disclosure that he had been entrusted with the sum of twenty thousand dollars by a former upper servant in the Morin family, one Madame Tibault, which she had received as a legacy from relatives in France.

The most searching scrutiny by friends and the legal authorities failed to reveal the disposition of the money. It had vanished, and left no trace. Some weeks before his death, Mr. Morin had drawn the entire amount, in gold coin, from the bank where it had been placed while he looked about (he told Madame Tibault) for a safe investment. Therefore, Mr. Morin’s memory seemed doomed to bear the cloud of dishonesty, while madame was, of course, disconsolate.

Then it was that Robbins and Dumars, representing their respective journals, began one of those pertinacious private investigations which, of late years, the press has adopted as a means to glory and the satisfaction of public curiosity.

“*Cherchez la femme*,” said Dumars.

“That’s the ticket!” agreed Robbins. “All roads lead to the eternal feminine. We will find the woman.”

They exhausted the knowledge of the staff of Mr. Morin’s hotel, from the bell-boy down to the proprietor. They gently, but inflexibly, pumped the family of the deceased as far as his cousins twice removed. They artfully sounded the employees of the late jeweller, and dogged his customers for information concerning his habits. Like bloodhounds they traced every step of the supposed defaulter, as nearly as might be, for years along the limited and monotonous paths he had trodden.

At the end of their labours, Mr. Morin stood, an immaculate man. Not one weakness that might be served up as a criminal tendency, not one deviation from the path of rectitude, not even a hint of a predilection for the opposite sex, was found to be placed in his debit. His life had been as regular and austere as a monk’s; his habits, simple and unconcealed. Generous, charitable, and a model in propriety, was the verdict of all who knew him.

“What, now?” asked Robbins, fingering his empty notebook.

“*Cherchez la femme*,” said Dumars, lighting a cigarette. “Try Lady Bellairs.”

This piece of femininity was the race-track favourite of the season. Being feminine, she was erratic in her gaits, and there were a few heavy losers about town who had believed she could be true. The reporters applied for information.

Mr. Morin? Certainly not. He was never even a spectator at the races. Not that kind of a man. Surprised the gentlemen should ask.

“Shall we throw it up?” suggested Robbins, “and let the puzzle department have a try?”

“*Cherchez la femme*,” hummed Dumars, reaching for a match. “Try the Little Sisters of What-d’-you-call-’em.”

It had developed, during the investigation, that Mr. Morin had held this benevolent order in particular favour. He had contributed liberally toward its support and had chosen its chapel as his favourite place of private worship. It was said that he went there daily to make his devotions at the altar. Indeed, toward the last of his life his whole mind seemed to have fixed itself upon religious matters, perhaps to the detriment of his worldly affairs.

Thither went Robbins and Dumars, and were admitted through the narrow doorway in the blank stone wall that frowned upon Bonhomme Street. An old woman was sweeping the chapel. She told them that Sister Félicité, the head of the order, was then at prayer at the altar in the alcove. In a few moments she would emerge. Heavy, black curtains screened the alcove. They waited.

Soon the curtains were disturbed, and Sister Félicité came forth. She was tall, tragic, bony, and plain-featured, dressed in the black gown and severe bonnet of the sisterhood.

Robbins, a good rough-and-tumble reporter, but lacking the delicate touch, began to speak.

They represented the press. The lady had, no doubt, heard of the Morin affair. It was necessary, in justice to that gentleman’s memory, to probe the mystery of the lost money. It was known that he had come often to this chapel. Any information, now, concerning Mr. Morin’s habits, tastes, the friends he had, and so on, would be of value in doing him posthumous justice.

Sister Félicité had heard. Whatever she knew would be willingly told, but it was very little. Monsieur Morin had been a good friend to the order, sometimes contributing as much as a hundred dollars. The sisterhood was an independent one, depending entirely upon private contributions for the means to carry on its charitable work. Mr. Morin had presented the chapel with silver candlesticks and an altar cloth. He came every day to worship in the chapel, sometimes remaining for an hour. He was a devout Catholic, consecrated to holiness. Yes, and also in the alcove was a statue of the Virgin that he had himself modeled, cast, and presented to the order. Oh, it was cruel to cast a doubt upon so good a man!

Robbins was also profoundly grieved at the imputation. But, until it was found what Mr. Morin had done with Madame Tibault’s money, he feared the tongue of slander would not be stilled. Sometimes—in fact, very often—in affairs of the kind there was—er—as the saying goes—er—a lady in the case. In absolute confidence, now—if—perhaps—

Sister Félicité’s large eyes regarded him solemnly.

“There was one woman,” she said, slowly, “to whom he bowed—to whom he gave his heart.”

Robbins fumbled rapturously for his pencil.

“Behold the woman!” said Sister Félicité, suddenly, in deep tones.

She reached a long arm and swept aside the curtain of the alcove. In there was a shrine, lit to a glow of soft colour by the light pouring through a stained-glass window. Within a deep niche in the bare stone wall stood an image of the Virgin Mary, the colour of pure gold.

Dumars, a conventional Catholic, succumbed to the dramatic in the act. He bowed his head for an instant and made the sign of the cross. The somewhat abashed Robbins, murmuring an indistinct apology, backed awkwardly away. Sister Félicité drew back the curtain, and the reporters departed.

On the narrow stone sidewalk of Bonhomme Street, Robbins turned to Dumars, with unworthy sarcasm.

“Well, what next? Churchy law fem?”

“Absinthe,” said Dumars.

With the history of the missing money thus partially related, some conjecture may be formed of the sudden idea that Madame Tibault’s words seemed to have suggested to Robbins’s brain.

Was it so wild a surmise—that the religious fanatic had offered up his wealth—or, rather, Madame Tibault’s—in the shape of a material symbol of his consuming devotion? Stranger things have been done in the name of worship. Was it not possible that the lost thousands were molded into that lustrous image? That the goldsmith had formed it of the pure and precious metal, and set it there, through some hope of a perhaps disordered brain to propitiate the saints and pave the way to his own selfish glory?

That afternoon, at five minutes to three, Robbins entered the chapel door of the Little Sisters of Samaria. He saw, in the dim light, a crowd of perhaps a hundred people gathered to attend the sale. Most of them were members of various religious orders, priests and churchmen, come to purchase the paraphernalia of the chapel, lest they fall into desecrating hands. Others were business men and agents come to bid upon the realty. A clerical-looking brother had volunteered to wield the hammer, bringing to the office of auctioneer the anomaly of choice diction and dignity of manner.

A few of the minor articles were sold, and then two assistants brought forward the image of the Virgin.

Robbins started the bidding at ten dollars. A stout man, in an ecclesiastical garb, went to fifteen. A voice from another part of the crowd raised to twenty. The three bid alternately, raising by bids of five, until the offer was fifty dollars. Then the stout man dropped out, and Robbins, as a sort of *coup de main*, went to a hundred.

“One hundred and fifty,” said the other voice.

“Two hundred,” bid Robbins, boldly.

“Two-fifty,” called his competitor, promptly.

The reporter hesitated for the space of a lightning flash, estimating how much he could borrow from the boys in the office, and screw from the business manager from his next month’s salary.

“Three hundred,” he offered.

“Three-fifty,” spoke up the other, in a louder voice—a voice that sent Robbins diving suddenly through the crowd in its direction, to catch Dumars, its owner, ferociously by the collar.

“You unconverted idiot!” hissed Robbins, close to his ear—“pool!”

“Agreed!” said Dumars, coolly. “I couldn’t raise three hundred and fifty dollars with a search-warrant, but I can stand half. What you come bidding against me for?”

“I thought I was the only fool in the crowd,” explained Robbins.

No one else bidding, the statue was knocked down to the syndicate at their last offer. Dumars remained with the prize, while Robbins hurried forth to wring from the resources and credit of both the price. He soon returned with the money, and the two musketeers loaded their precious package into a carriage and drove with it to Dumars’s room, in old Chartres Street, nearby. They lugged it, covered with a cloth, up the stairs, and deposited it on a table. A hundred pounds it weighed, if an ounce, and at that estimate, according to their calculation, if their daring theory were correct, it stood there, worth twenty thousand golden dollars.

Robbins removed the covering, and opened his pocket-knife.

“*Sacré!* ” muttered Dumars, shuddering. “It is the Mother of Christ. What would you do?”

“Shut up, Judas!” said Robbins, coldly. “It’s too late for you to be saved now.”

With a firm hand, he chipped a slice from the shoulder of the image. The cut showed a dull, grayish metal, with a thin coating of gold leaf.

“Lead!” announced Robbins, hurling his knife to the floor—“gilded!”

“To the devil with it!” said Dumars, forgetting his scruples. “I must have a drink.”

Together they walked moodily to the café of Madame Tribault, two squares away.

It seemed that madame’s mind had been stirred that day to fresh recollections of the past services of the two young men in her behalf.

“You mustn’t sit by those table,” she interposed, as they were about to drop into their accustomed seats. “Thass so, boys. But no. I mek you come at this room, like my *trés bon amis*. Yes. I goin’ mek for you myself one *anisette* and one *café royale* ver’ fine. Ah! I lak treat my fren’ nize. Yes. Plis come in this way.”

Madame led them into the little back room, into which she sometimes invited the especially favoured of her customers. In two comfortable armchairs, by a big window that opened upon the courtyard, she placed them, with a low table between. Bustling hospitably about, she began to prepare the promised refreshments.

It was the first time the reporters had been honoured with admission to the sacred precincts. The room was in dusky twilight, flecked with gleams of the polished, fine woods and burnished glass and metal that the Creoles love. From the little courtyard a tiny fountain sent in an insinuating sound of trickling waters, to which a banana plant by the window kept time with its tremulous leaves.

Robbins, an investigator by nature, sent a curious glance roving about the room. From some barbaric ancestor, madame had inherited a *penchant* for the crude in decoration.

The walls were adorned with cheap lithographs—florid libels upon nature, addressed to the taste of the *bourgeoisie*—birthday cards, garish newspaper supplements, and specimens of art—advertising calculated to reduce the optic nerve to stunned submission. A patch of something unintelligible in the midst of the more candid display puzzled Robbins, and he rose and took a step nearer, to interrogate it at closer range. Then he leaned weakly against the wall, and called out:

“Madame Tibault! Oh, madame! Since when—oh! since when have you been in the habit of papering your walls with five thousand dollar United States four per cent. gold bonds? Tell me—is this a Grimm’s fairy tale, or should I consult an oculist?”

At his words, Madame Tibault and Dumars approached.

“H’what you say?” said madame, cheerily. “H’what you say, M’sieur Robbin? *Bon!* Ah! those nize li’l peezes papier! One tam I think those w’at you call calendair, wiz ze li’l day of mont’ below. But, no. Those wall is broke in those plaze, M’sieur Robbin’, and I plaze those li’l peezes papier to conceal ze crack. I did think the couleur harm’nize so well with the wall papier. Where I get them from? Ah, yes, I remem’ ver’ well. One day M’sieur Morin, he come at my houze—thass ‘bout one mont’ before he shall die—thass ‘long ‘bout tam he promise fo’ inves’ those money fo’ me. M’sieur Morin, he leave thoze li’l peezes papier in those table, and say ver’ much ‘bout money thass hard for me to ond’stan. *Mais* I never see those money again. Thass ver’ wicked man, M’sieur Morin. H’what you call those peezes papier, M’sieur Robbin’—*bon!* ”

Robbins explained.

“There’s your twenty thousand dollars, with coupons attached,” he said, running his thumb around the edge of the four bonds. “Better get an expert to peel them off for you. Mister Morin was all right. I’m going out to get my ears trimmed.”

He dragged Dumars by the arm into the outer room. Madame was screaming for Nicolette and Mémé to come and observe the fortune returned to her by M’sieur Morin, that best of men, that saint in glory.

“Marsy,” said Robbins, “I’m going on a jamboree. For three days the esteemed *Pic.* will have to get along without my valuable services. I advise you to join me. Now, that green stuff you drink is no good. It stimulates thought. What we want to do is to forget to remember. I’ll introduce you to the only lady in this case that is guaranteed to produce the desired results. Her name is Belle of Kentucky, twelve-year-old Bourbon. In quarts. How does the idea strike you?”

“*Allons!* ” said Dumars. “*Cherchez la femme*.”