

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, Dec 20, 1890 to May 30, 1891)

## Josephine

The lawyer's office in which I was supposed to be studying before I came to the bar and where I was also employed as clerk, had among its clients two sisters – rich old spinsters who lived together in the square house which had been built by their grandfather in one of the most Belgravian quarters of the city. It stood far back from the street in a well-kept garden which was surrounded on all sides by a high brick wall. The two sisters had survived the rest of their family and had succeeded to all of its wealth except what had been thrown away in Wall Street by a younger brother who was knocked off the deck of his yacht with a fractured skull by the main boom, before he had time to impoverish them.

They were women of good business sense, which means that they bought good advice and took it unquestioningly, never attempting to stray off into the deep water of independent action where so many of their sex are drowned. In these days of female progress into all sorts of unnatural fields, it is the misfortune of many women who have inherited fortunes to think that it is their duty to trust the man in their business matters and the result is they make themselves and everyone they deal with very unhappy and end by making a mess of their affairs. Our two sisters however, attended in a harmless way to some of the little details of their business such as cutting off coupons which is feminine labor. Once every quarter their box from the Safety Deposit Company's vault was taken to the house where they counted over and checked off its contents to their hearts content. It was part of my duties to escort the steady old servant named Harkins who came from their residence to the office with their order for the box.

On these occasions I waited in the library while the box was overhauled by its owners above stairs, and I enjoyed these opportunities of looking into some of the many rare books which their shelves contained. The box was generally taken from Harkins, carried up stairs and brought down again by a maid – a French woman, who, as I learned, had been brought home by the two sisters several years before on their return from their last sojourn abroad. Though this woman was no longer young, she was still of a striking appearance. She had an abundance of glossy black hair which she arranged as only a French woman can and she wore her white, maid's cap coquettishly as if it were her first. What primarily caught my eye however was her figure. Dress reformers and Doctors may talk until they are black in the face about the beauty of the shape of the Venus of Milo – that sort of thing does very well in marble, but in dress goods I believe there is nothing quite as pleasing to the unscientific masculine eye as a taper waist with the contrast of ampler proportions above and below. This evidently was Josephine's notion and she carried out her idea admirably. In fact, most French women do. They must have their taille, as they call it.

One day Harkins and I had made our customary trip with the box and I had just taken down a book in the library when I heard suddenly an unwonted sound of voices above and soon after a light step on the polished floor of the hall brought Josephine to the door

with "The ladies beg the Monsieur to go upstairs."

I followed her up the broad staircase wondering what had happened and found the two old ladies in a sort of sitting room at a table strewn with papers, and the open box before them. In a constrained manner one of the old gentlewomen asked me to be seated and explained at once and in a few words without any undignified emotion that they had sent for me because a package containing twenty five one thousand dollar U. S. bonds was missing from their box. The bonds were there three months before when they had cut off the coupons and then they had locked the box and returned it to the vault by Harkins in my care as usual.

She wished me to tell my employer what had happened and desired him to use at once such measures as would be suggested to him to recover the property if possible and punish the wrongdoer whoever he might be. On second thoughts she asked me to tell her attorney that she wished him to call upon her. After a pause, during which I felt decidedly uncomfortable, I realized that she had said all she had to say and then I was dismissed. Josephine followed me to the library in a few moments with the box. Her usual wistful expression was more severe and her gray eyes said more cruelly than any words of her mistress that I was under suspicion.

Harkins came as usual from the servant's quarters and taking the box from Josephine, followed me into the street. I discovered at once that he knew nothing of the loss of the bonds and realized then that the whole responsibility was laid upon my shoulders. I had learned to respect the old Englishman, and as companions in this trouble we began at once to consider how the loss had happened. We both knew perfectly well that no harm had come to the contents of the box while it was in our custody. It was always locked and we never had seen the key. Moreover, it was always tied up securely so that even if it had been given into our custody unlocked, nothing could have fallen from it while it was in our hands. After delivering the box to the clerk at the Safety Deposit Company we had always waited until he had put it into its separate little pigeon hole, locked the door of the pigeon hole and returned the key to me.

The box never left our site from the time it left its pigeon hole in the vault until it was returned there again, except when it was in the hands of the ladies. The result was that we concluded that the bonds must have been taken out by that member of the firm who had access to the box, who probably had taken advantage of the high premium and converted them, for a better investment, and failed to report to his clients.

My first word with that gentleman however dispelled this theory. He was aghast at what I told him and I could see that he was very much pained when he said that it put me in a very unpleasant position. I could see that he could not get away from the idea that Harkins and I had been careless if not worse. He knew my fondness for a certain kind of imported beer which could be obtained from a place that lay on our road to and from the house, and he even asked me if I had ever stopped there with the box in our possession. He relieved me a great deal and did the kindest thing he could have done under the circumstances, by telling me he should employ a detective at once and expect me to act

with the detective. I told him his clients wanted to see him and the next morning as he passed me in the office he told me he had seen them the evening before, and shaking his head sadly said "It's a bad business – a bad business."

The next day as I went into the lower hallway of the building in which our offices were located, there was a crowd of people waiting for the elevator to come down, two or three ladies and among the half dozen men one scholarly looking gentleman whose toilet was not so faultless as to be noticeable, but gave you an idea of clean underclothing and frequent baths, and I was further drawn to him by the fact that when he got into the elevator he did not take his hat off, thereby showing that he properly put the elevator in the same category with other hallways and passage ways in a large building where men are expected to wear their hats. If there was any difference with reference to the elevator it always seemed to me it was rather more in favor of keeping the hat on there than in other public places, because of its greater draftiness.

When we reached our floor the scholarly looking gentleman who had attracted my attention, left the elevator, and in a little while I was called in to the office of my employer and was there introduced to him as the gentleman from the detective agency who would act with me in the matter of recovering the lost bonds. I took a seat and submitted to a good deal of questioning which showed beyond question that the detective had concluded at once that I knew more about the missing bonds than I had told. I saw also that he was not very anxious to have any assistance from me, but he accepted it with good grace.

I went with him to the Safety Deposit Company where he examined the premises and the box and its lock, and made an appointment with me to go to our client's residence and talk with Harkins that afternoon. When he came to the office to keep his appointment his appearance was so changed that I did not recognize him until he introduced himself. He was stooped shouldered, his hair slightly gray, he wore glasses and had a general slouchiness, of appearance. We were shown in to the library by Josephine who soon brought Harkins and at the request of the detective I left the room. He was closeted with Harkins for over an hour and when Harkins came out he sent for Josephine.

After Josephine had been with him for some time she took the detective up into the sitting room where he had an interview with the two ladies after which he and I left the house together. We walked for some time in silence and then he said, "Of course you realized that at first I suspected that you and Harkins knew about those bonds, and that was only natural under the circumstances. However you will accept my apology for I believe now that the French woman has them.

In thinking over all of the possibilities, this had occurred to me, but so far as I could see there was nothing in it. Harkins and I had always announced our coming by ringing the front door bell, so that her mistresses knew of our arrival and any delay in the delivery of the box to them, such as would be necessary to have enabled Josephine to take off the wrapper and pick the lock would have been noticeable; and so also when she brought the box down – unless the sound of the closing front door was heard immediately after she left the room with the box the delay would have been noticeable.

I explained these points to the detective who shook his head and said they did not explain it. If she had done the work she had a key and it would have taken her but a very few seconds to take off the wrapper and open the box with a key. "Moreover" said he "I did not quite like the way she appeared, she was entirely too cool and unconcerned. She did not suggest any suspicions of you or of Harkins or any one and seemed almost indifferent over the loss of her mistresses; and as for herself, from her appearance you would have supposed that the idea of her being suspected had never entered her mind."

In due time the conviction of the detective was conveyed to my employer, who on reporting this result of the investigations to his clients, was repulsed by their positive refusal to listen to any such suggestion. They had known Josephine for years, and she had no opportunity, even if she was capable of doing such a thing and the old ladies had ended by discharging poor Harkens and insisting that he and I should be indicted.

When this was reported to the detective he said he supposed that would be the stand they would take from what he had observed at his interview with them, and on his suggestion the old ladies were promised that Harkins and I would be attended to, and he undertook to make Miss Josephine confess to the theft and said that he should not see us again for some time.

I looked up poor Harkens and got him lodgings and told him to cheer up, that we would come out all right, for I had great faith in the truth coming out, and although I could not see just how Josephine could be guilty, I tried to have full confidence in the detective's theory.

We heard nothing from him for about two months, when one day he turned up unexpectedly at the office, and going with me into the private sitting room of my employer unbuttoned his coat and drew out a one thousand dollar U.S. four percent bond and reading the numbers said, "This I believe is one of the missing numbers? Miss Josephine gave me this last evening." All the details as he told them to us, how he unearthed her secret, I have not time to tell, but I will give his story briefly somewhat as he told it. He said, "I was satisfied that Josephine was the thief and I resolved to make her acquaintance. After some inquiry I learned that almost her only friend out of the house was a dress maker living on —— Avenue and I obtained lodgings with this lady who let furnished rooms to single gentlemen.

I soon succeeded in making myself solid with my landlady and having learned that Josephine generally came to see her on Sunday afternoons, I took occasion one Saturday to fall violently ill and to be sufficiently convalescent on Sunday afternoon to be in the family sitting room when Josephine arrived. Our acquaintance ripened rapidly. She was somewhat older than I, but she was French you know.

To her I was in the service of Edison Electrical Company and was soon to be sent to Paris. She undertook to teach me a little French and of course I made love to her. They say of old men that "an old fool is a great fool in affairs of the heart" and there is no doubt that a

starved woman of Josephine's age yields to that sort of thing more readily than one of more youth and opportunities.

In a short time I discovered she was longing to return to the Boulevards. I was too poor to marry but I might do so if I have a little money to buy an outfit with to take to France of certain electrical supplies which were made in this country. After some hesitation she finally came to the point and told me that she had saved her money and put it in a government bond which she was willing to give me, and she produced this bond, but she made it a condition of giving it to me that I should agree to pay for the goods that I was to buy, only upon their delivery in Paris and she insisted that she knew that the bond would bring more in Paris than in this country.

This showed that she was sharp enough to know that the numbers of the bonds would betray her in case she attempted to sell them here, and the rest of them are undoubtedly are in her possession. And so they proved to be.

Harkins was taken back and his wounded feelings were substantially soothed, while Josephine returned to the Boulevards, but without the substantial pension with which she had thought to provide herself. She had learned where her mistresses kept the key of the box and had succeeded in having a duplicate made, which, watching her chance she used, on the staircase.

Cha. B. Wilby

April 25th 1891