

The Necklace

By Guy de Maupassant

SHE was one of those pretty and charming girls, born by a blunder of destiny in a family of employees. She had no dowry, no expectations, no means of being known, understood, loved, married by a man rich and distinguished; and she let them make a match for her with a little clerk in the Department of Education.

She was simple since she could not be adorned; but she was unhappy as though kept out of her own class; for women have no caste and no descent, their beauty, their grace, and their charm serving them instead of birth and fortune. Their native keenness, their instinctive elegance, their flexibility of mind, are their only hierarchy; and these make the daughters of the people the equals of the most lofty dames.

She suffered intensely, feeling herself born for every delicacy and every luxury. She suffered from the poverty of her dwelling, from the worn walls, the abraded chairs, the ugliness of the stuffs. All these things, which another woman of her caste would not even have noticed, tortured her and made her indignant. The sight of the little girl from Brittany who did her humble housework awoke in her desolated regrets and distracted dreams. She let her mind dwell on the quiet vestibules, hung with Oriental tapestries, lighted by tall lamps of bronze, and on the two tall footmen in knee breeches who dozed in the large armchairs, made drowsy by the heat of the furnace. She let her mind dwell on the large parlors, decked with old silk, with their delicate furniture, supporting precious bric-a-brac, and on the coquettish little rooms, perfumed, prepared for the five o'clock chat with the most intimate friends, men well known and sought after, whose attentions all women envied and desired.

When she sat down to dine, before a tablecloth three days old, in front of her husband, who lifted the cover of the tureen, declaring with an air of satisfaction, "Ah, the good *pot-au-feu*. I don't know anything better than that," she was thinking of delicate repasts, with glittering silver, with tapestries peopling the walls with ancient figures and with strange birds in a fairy-like forest; she was thinking of exquisite dishes, served in marvelous platters, of compliment whispered and heard with a sphinx-like smile, while she was eating the rosy flesh of a trout or the wings of a quail.

She had no dresses, no jewelry, nothing. And she loved nothing else; she felt herself made for that only. She would so much have liked to please, to be envied, to be seductive and sought after.

She had a rich friend, a comrade of her convent days, whom she did not want to go and see any more, so much did she suffer as she came away. And she wept all day long, from chagrin, from regret, from despair, and from distress.

But one evening her husband came in with a proud air, holding in his hand a large envelope.

"There," said he, "there's something for you."

She quickly tore the paper and took out of it a printed card which bore these words:—

"The Minister of Education and Mme. Georges Ramponeau beg M. and Mme. Loisel to do them the honor to pass the evening with them at the palace of the Ministry, on

Monday, January 18.”

Instead of being delighted, as her husband hoped, she threw the invitation on the table with annoyance, murmuring—

“What do you want me to do with that?”

“But, my dear, I thought you would be pleased. You never go out, and here’s a chance, a fine one. I had the hardest work to get it. Everybody is after them; they are greatly sought for and not many are given to the clerks. You will see there all the official world.”

She looked at him with an irritated eye and she declared with impatience:—

“What do you want me to put on my back to go there?”

He had not thought of that; he hesitated:—

“But the dress in which you go to the theater. That looks very well to me—”

He shut up, astonished and distracted at seeing that his wife was weeping. Two big tears were descending slowly from the corners of the eyes to the corners of the mouth. He stuttered:—

“What’s the matter? What’s the matter?”

But by a violent effort she had conquered her trouble, and she replied in a calm voice as she wiped her damp cheeks:—

“Nothing. Only I have no clothes, and in consequence I cannot go to this party. Give your card to some colleague whose wife has a better outfit than I.”

He was disconsolate. He began again:—

“See here, Mathilde, how much would this cost, a proper dress, which would do on other occasions; something very simple?”

She reflected a few seconds, going over her calculations, and thinking also of the sum which she might ask without meeting an immediate refusal and a frightened exclamation from the frugal clerk.

“At last, she answered hesitatingly:—

“I don’t know exactly, but it seems to me that with four hundred francs I might do it.”

He grew a little pale, for he was reserving just that sum to buy a gun and treat himself to a little shooting, the next summer, on the plain of Nanterre, with some friends who used to shoot larks there on Sundays.

But he said:—

“All right. I will give you four hundred francs. But take care to have a pretty dress.”

The day of the party drew near, and Mme. Loisel seemed sad, restless, anxious. Yet her dress was ready. One evening her husband said to her:—

“What’s the matter? Come, now, you have been quite queer these last three days.”

And she answered:—

“It annoys me not to have a jewel, not a single stone, to put on. I shall look like distress. I would almost rather not go to this party.”

He answered:—

“You will wear some natural flowers. They are very stylish this time of the year. For ten francs you will have two or three magnificent roses.”

But she was not convinced.

“No; there’s nothing more humiliating than to look poor among a lot of rich women.”

But her husband cried:—

“What a goose you are! Go find your friend, Mme. Forester, and ask her to lend you

some jewelry. You know her well enough to do that.”

She gave a cry of joy:—

“That’s true. I had not thought of it.”

The next day she went to her friend’s and told her about her distress.

Mme. Forester went to her mirrored wardrobe, took out a large casket, brought it, opened it, and said to Mme. Loisel:—

“Choose, my dear.”

She saw at first bracelets, then a necklace of pearls, then a Venetian cross of gold set with precious stones of an admirable workmanship. She tried on the ornaments before the glass, hesitated, and could not decide to take them off and to give them up. She kept on asking:—

“You haven’t anything else?”

“Yes, yes. Look. I do not know what will happen to please you.”

All at once she discovered, in a box of black satin, a superb necklace of diamonds, and her heart began to beat with boundless desire. Her hands trembled in taking it up. She fastened it round her throat, on her high dress, and remained in ecstasy before herself.

Then, she asked, hesitating, full of anxiety:—

“Can you lend me this, only this?”

“Yes, yes, certainly.”

She sprang to her friend’s neck, kissed her with ardor, and then escaped with her treasure.

The day of the party arrived. Mme. Loisel was a success. She was the prettiest of them all, elegant, gracious, smiling, and mad with joy. All the men were looking at her, inquiring her name, asking to be introduced. All the attaches of the Cabinet wanted to dance with her. The Minister took notice of her.

She danced with delight, with passion, intoxicated with pleasure, thinking of nothing, in the triumph of her beauty, in the glory of her success, in a sort of cloud of happiness made up of all these tributes, of all the admirations, of all these awakened desires, of this victory so complete and so sweet to a woman’s heart.

She went away about four in the morning. Since midnight—her husband has been dozing in a little anteroom with three other men whose wives were having a good time.

He threw over her shoulders the wraps he had brought to go home in, modest garments of every-day life, the poverty of which was out of keeping with the elegance of the ball dress. She felt this, and wanted to fly so as not to be noticed by the other women, who were wrapping themselves up in rich furs.

Loisel kept her back—

“Wait a minute; you will catch cold outside; I’ll call a cab.”

But she did not listen to him, and went downstairs rapidly. When they were in the street, they could not find a carriage, and they set out in search of one, hailing the drivers whom they saw passing in the distance.

They went down toward the Seine, disgusted, shivering. Finally, they found on the Quai one of those old night-hawk cabs which one sees in Paris only after night has fallen, as though they are ashamed of their misery in the daytime.

It brought them to their door, rue des Martyrs; and they went up their own stairs sadly. For her it was finished. And he was thinking that he would have to be at the Ministry at

ten o'clock.

She took off the wraps with which she had covered her shoulders, before the mirror, so as to see herself once more in her glory. But suddenly she gave a cry. She no longer had the necklace around her throat!

Her husband, half undressed already, asked—

“What is the matter with you?”

She turned to him, terror-stricken:—

“I—I—I have not Mme. Forester's diamond necklace!”

He jumped up, frightened—

“What? How? It is not possible!”

And they searched in the folds of the dress, in the folds of the wrap, in the pockets, everywhere. They did not find it.

He asked:—

“Are you sure you still had it when you left the ball?”

“Yes, I touched it in the vestibule of the Ministry.”

“But if you had lost it in the street, we should have heard it fall. It must be in the cab.”

“Yes. That is probable. Did you take the number?”

“No. And you—you did not even look at it?”

“No.”

They gazed at each other, crushed. At last Loisel dressed himself again.

“I'm going,” he said, “back the whole distance we came on foot, to see if I cannot find it.”

And he went out. She stayed there, in her ball dress, without strength to go to bed, overwhelmed, on a chair, without a fire, without a thought.

Her husband came back about seven o'clock. He had found nothing.

Then he went to police headquarters, to the newspapers to offer a reward, to the cab company; he did everything, in fact, that a trace of hope could urge him to.

She waited all day, in the same dazed state in face of this horrible disaster.

Loisel came back in the evening, with his face worn and white; he had discovered nothing.

“You must write to your friend,” he said, “that you have broken the clasp of her necklace and that you are having it repaired. That will give us time to turn around.”

She wrote as he dictated.

At the end of a week they had lost all hope. And Loisel, aged by five years, declared:—

“We must see how we can replace those jewels.”

The next day they took the case which had held them to the jeweler whose name was in the cover. He consulted his books.

“It was not I, madam, who sold this necklace. I only supplied the case.”

Then they went from jeweler to jeweler, looking for a necklace like the other, consulting their memory,—sick both of them with grief and anxiety.

In a shop in the Palais Royal, they found a diamond necklace that seemed to them absolutely like the one they were seeking. It was priced forty thousand francs. They could have it for thirty-six.

They begged the jeweler not to sell it for three days. And they made a bargain that he should take it back for thirty-four thousand, if the first was found before the end of

February.

Loisel possessed eighteen thousand francs which his father had left him. He had to borrow the remainder.

He borrowed, asking a thousand francs from one, five hundred from another, five here, three louis there. He gave promissory notes, made ruinous agreements, dealt with usurers, with all kinds of lenders. He compromised the end of his life, risked his signature without even knowing whether it could be honored; and, frightened by all the anguish of the future, by the black misery which was about to settle down on him, by the perspective of all sorts of physical deprivations and of all sorts of moral tortures, he went to buy the new diamond necklace, laying down on the jeweler's counter thirty-six thousand francs.

When Mme. Loisel took back the necklace to Mme. Forester, the latter said, with an irritated air:—

“You ought to have brought it back sooner, for I might have needed it.”

She did not open the case, which her friend had been fearing. If she had noticed the substitution, what would she have thought? What would she have said? Might she not have been taken for a thief?

Mme. Loisel learned the horrible life of the needy. She made the best of it, moreover, frankly, heroically. The frightful debt must be paid. She would pay it. They dismissed the servant; they changed their rooms; they took an attic under the roof.

She learned the rough work of the household, the odious labors of the kitchen. She washed the dishes, wearing out her pink nails on the greasy pots and the bottoms of the pans. She washed the dirty linen, the shirts and the towels, which she dried on a rope; she carried down the garbage to the street every morning, and she carried up the water, pausing for breath on every floor. And, dressed like a woman of the people, she went to the fruiterer, the grocer, the butcher, a basket on her arm, bargaining, insulted, fighting for her wretched money, sou by sou.

Every month they had to pay notes, to renew others to gain time.

The husband worked in the evening keeping up the books of a shopkeeper, and at night often he did copying at five sous the page.

And this life lasted ten years.

At the end of ten years they had paid everything back, everything, with the rates of usury and all the accumulation of heaped-up interest.

Mme. Loisel seemed aged now. She had become the robust woman, hard and rough, of a poor household. Badly combed, with her skirts awry and her hands red, her voice was loud, and she washed the floor with splashing water.

But sometimes, when her husband was at the office, she sat down by the window and she thought of that evening long ago, of that ball, where she had been so beautiful and so admired.

What would have happened if she had not lost that necklace? Who knows? Who knows? How singular life is, how changeable! What a little thing it takes to save you or to lose you.

Then, one Sunday, as she was taking a turn in the Champs Elysées, as a recreation after the labors of the week, she perceived suddenly a woman walking with a child. It was Mme. Forester, still young, still beautiful, still seductive.

Mme. Loisel felt moved. Should she speak to her? Yes, certainly. And now that she had

paid up, she would tell her all. Why not?

She drew near.

“Good morning, Jeanne.”

The other did not recognize her, astonished to be hailed thus familiarly by this woman of the people. She hesitated—

“But—madam—I don’t know—are you not making a mistake?”

“No. I am Mathilde Loisel.”

Her friend gave a cry—

“Oh!—My poor Mathilde, how you are changed.”

“Yes, I have had hard days since I saw you, and many troubles,—and that because of you.”

“Of me?—How so?”

“You remember that diamond necklace that you lent me to go to the ball at the Ministry?”

“Yes. And then?”

“Well, I lost it.”

“How can that be?—since you brought it back to me?”

“I brought you back another just like it. And now for ten years we have been paying for it. You will understand that it was not easy for us, who had nothing. At last, it is done, and I am mighty glad.”

Mme. Forester had guessed.

“You say that you bought a diamond necklace to replace mine?”

“Yes. You did not notice it, even, did you? They were exactly alike?”

And she smiled with proud and naïve joy.

Mme. Forester, much moved, took her by both hands:—

“Oh, my poor Mathilde. But mine were false. At most they were worth five hundred francs!”