

3. The Necklace

by Guy de Maupassant



Mathilde was a pretty and charming young woman. But, as if by some mistake of fate, she was born into a family which was quite poor. She had no money and no hope for obtaining it. She had no way of becoming known in society. She had no chance to meet and marry a rich and famous man. So she married a clerk in the Department of Education.

She dressed plainly because she could not afford to dress well. This bothered her very much and made her unhappy. She acted as though she were once very wealthy and had lost all her money.

She suffered all the time because she believed that she was born for luxuries. She suffered because of the poverty of her apartment. The walls were dirty. The chairs were worn out. The curtains were ugly. Someone else might not have minded these things so much. But they tortured her and made her angry. She dreamed of servants, of dinners by candlelight, of sitting in large rooms talking with well-known and influential friends.

When she sat down to dinner, her husband would lift the lid on the pot.

"Ah. Good stew!" he would say. "There's nothing I like better than that."

And she would think of magnificent dinners, of expensive plates, of shining silverware.

She had no fine dresses, no jewels—nothing. And she loved things like those. She felt made for them. She would so have liked to please. She wanted to be envied, to be charming, to be popular.

She had a friend, Madame Forestier, a former schoolmate, who was rich. Mathilde did not see her very often, because she suffered so much when she came back to her own drab apartment.

But, one evening, her husband came home looking very pleased. He held a large envelope in his hand.

"Here," he said. "I've got something for you."

She quickly tore open the envelope. Inside was a printed card with these words:

*The Minister of Public Education
requests the honor of your presence
at the Annual Ball of the Department
of Education on Friday evening, January 18th.*

Instead of being delighted, she threw the invitation on the table. "What do you want me to do with that?" she murmured.

"But, my dear, I thought you would be glad. You never go out, and this is such a good opportunity. I had an awful lot of trouble getting it. Everyone wants to go, and not many members of the office staff have been invited. You'll see all the most important people in Paris there."

She looked at him, annoyed. "And what do you want me to wear?" she asked impatiently.

He had not thought of that. "He stammered, "Why, the dress you always go out in. That looks quite nice, I think."

He stopped, seeing that his wife was crying. "What's the matter?" he asked. "What's the trouble?"

Finally, she gained control of herself. "Nothing," she replied in a calm voice. "Only I have no dress to wear. Therefore I can't go to this ball. Give your card to some friend whose wife has better clothes than I."

He was in despair. "Let's see, Mathilde," he said. "How much would a suitable dress cost? Something very simple which you could wear on other occasions?"

She thought for several seconds. She wondered how much she could ask for without getting a quick refusal from her thrifty husband.

Finally, she answered, "I don't know exactly. But I think I could manage it with four hundred francs."

He grew pale. Four hundred francs was just the amount he had set aside to buy a rifle so that he could go hunting with some friends next summer.

However, he said, "All right. I'll give you four hundred francs. But be sure to buy a pretty dress."

The day of the ball drew near. Mathilde Loisel seemed sad, uneasy, anxious. Her dress was ready, however. Her husband said to her one evening:

"What's the matter, Mathilde? You've been so quiet these last three days."

"It annoys me," she answered, "not to have a single jewel. Not one stone to put on. I'll look so out of place. I'd almost rather not go at all."

"You might wear some flowers," he

suggested. "They're in style this time of year. For ten francs you can get two or three beautiful roses."

She was not convinced. "No," she said, "there's nothing worse than looking poor among other woman who are rich."

"Wait!" he cried. "Go see your friend Madame Forestier, and ask her to lend you some jewels. You know each other well enough for you to do that."

"Why, that's true!" she said, happily. "I hadn't thought of that."

The next day she went to her friend and explained her problem.

Madame Forestier went to a closet, took out a large jewel box, and opened it.

"Pick something out, my dear," Madame Forestier said.

First Mathilde saw some bracelets, then a pearl necklace, then some gold pieces, and some marvelous gems. She tried on the jewelry in front of the mirror. Everything looked so beautiful that she couldn't make up her mind. She kept on asking, "Have you any more?"

"Oh, yes, keep on looking. I don't know what you like."

All of a sudden Mathilde found, in a black satin box, a superb diamond necklace. Her hands trembled as she picked it up. She fastened it around her throat and stared, with delight, at her reflection in the mirror.

She asked breathlessly, "Can you lend me this. Only this?"

"Why, yes, certainly."

Elated, Mathilde kissed her friend with joy. Then she fled with her treasure.

The day of the ball arrived. Mathilde Loisel was a great success. She was the

prettiest one there. She was gracious, smiling, and charming. Important men asked who she was, asked to be introduced, asked for a chance to dance with her. And she danced and danced, filled with pleasure. She danced madly, in a kind of cloud of happiness. She danced with the knowledge that she had been a complete success.

When the ball ended, it was very late. "Wait a bit," her husband said. "You'll catch cold outside. I'll go and call a cab."

But she did not listen. They rapidly descended the stairs. But when they got to the street, they couldn't find a cab. Shivering with cold, they finally found one after some time.

The cab dropped them at their door, and they sadly climbed up the stairs. It was all over for her. And as for him, he groaned that he had to be at work at ten o'clock in the morning.

She removed the coat in front of the mirror. She wanted to take one last look at herself. Then suddenly she cried out. She no longer had the necklace around her neck!

"What's the matter?" said her husband.

She turned wildly towards him. "I have—I have—I've lost Madame Forestier's necklace."

He stood up, alarmed.

"What? How? Impossible!"

And they looked in the folds of her dress, in the folds of her coat. In her pockets. Everywhere. They did not find it.

He asked, "You're sure you had it on when you left the ball?"

"Yes. I felt it when we came down the stairs."

"But if you had lost it in the street, we would have heard it fall. You must have lost it in the cab."

"Yes, probably. Did you notice the number?"

"No. And you?"

"No."

They looked at one another, horrified.

"I'll go back on foot," he said. "I'll go over the whole route we took, and see if I can find it."

And he went out. She sat waiting on a chair in her ball dress. She didn't have the strength to go to bed.

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

He went to Police Headquarters. He went to the newspaper offices to offer a reward. He went to the cab companies.

She waited all day, mad with fear.

Loisel returned at night. His face was hollow and pale. He had discovered nothing.

"You must write to your friend," he said.

"I'll tell her that you have broken the lock on the necklace and that you are having it repaired. That will at least give us a little time."

She wrote as he suggested.

At the end of the week they had lost all hope. Loisel, who had aged five years during this time, declared:

"We must figure out how to replace that necklace."

The next day they took the case which had held the necklace, and they went to the jeweler whose name was written inside. He looked through his records.

"It was not I who sold that necklace," the jeweler said. "I only supplied the case."

Then they went from jeweler to jeweler,

searching for a necklace just like the other one. They were both sick with worry and despair. Finally, they found a diamond necklace that seemed exactly like the one they were seeking. At least it seemed identical. It was priced at forty thousand francs. The jeweler said they could have it for thirty-six thousand.

So they begged the jeweler not to sell it for three days. And they agreed that he would buy it back for thirty-four thousand francs if they found the other one before the end of February.

Loisel had a little money that his father had left him. He would borrow the rest.

He did borrow. He asked for a thousand francs here, five hundred francs there. He signed notes, made promises, agreed to terrible deals. He took chances without being certain that he could ever pay back the money. Finally, after three miserable days, he was able to place the thirty-six thousand francs on the jeweler's counter.

Mathilde immediately took the necklace to her friend. Madame Forestier said to her coldly, "You should have returned it sooner. I might have needed it."

Fortunately, Madame Forestier did not open the case, as her friend had feared. If she had noticed the difference, what would she have thought? What would she have said? Would she have taken Madame Loisel for a thief?

Madame Loisel now began to know the horrible existence of the needy. That terrible debt had to be paid. She would help pay it. They moved out of their apartment and rented a tiny attic under a roof.

She came to know what heavy housework meant. She washed dishes, using her rosy nails on the pots and pans. She scrubbed dirty clothes which she later hung on a line to dry. She carried out garbage. She went shopping, bargained for everything, insulted shopkeepers.

Each month they had to pay some debts. Others they managed to postpone, gaining more time.

Her husband worked evenings doing all kinds of bookkeeping. Then late at night, he copied manuscripts to earn a few extra francs.

And this life lasted ten years.

At the end of ten years they had paid back everything. Everything—the money as well as the high interest on it.

Madame Loisel looked old now. Her hair was messy and her hands were red. She had become rough and hard. She talked loudly while she washed floors with a bucket of water. But sometimes, while her husband was at work, she would sit near the window and think of that evening long ago, of that ball where she had been so beautiful and admired.

What would have happened if she had not lost that necklace? Who knows? Who can say? Life is strange and filled with changes. How little a thing is needed for us to be lost or be saved.

One Sunday Madame Loisel wanted to take a break from her hard week's labors. She decided to take a walk along the wide and beautiful avenue Champs Élysées. Suddenly, she noticed a woman walking with a child. It was Madame Forestier, still young, still beautiful, still charming.

Madame Loisel felt moved. Should she speak to her? Of course. Now that she had paid for the necklace, she would tell her the whole story. Why not?

She went up to her. "Hello, Jeanne," said Mathilde Loisel.

The other was astonished at hearing her first name being called by a common stranger. She did not recognize Mathilde, and stammered:

"But—I do not know you—You must be mistaken."

"No. I am Mathilde Loisel."

Her friend cried out, "Oh, my poor Mathilde! How you have changed!"

"Yes, I've had hard times since I last saw you. Wretched days—and all because of you."

"Because of me? What do you mean?"

"Do you remember that diamond necklace you once lent me?"

"Yes. Well?"

"Well, I lost it."

"What do you mean? You brought it back."

"I brought you back another just like it. And we've been paying for it for ten years now. You can understand that it was not very easy for us who had nothing. Well, it's over now, and I am very glad."

Madame Forestier stopped short.

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

"Yes. You never noticed it, then! They were very much alike."

And Madame Loisel smiled proudly.

Madame Forestier, deeply moved, took her friend's hands in her own.

"Oh, my poor Mathilde," she said. "My necklace was made of glass—a fake. At most it was worth only 500 francs!"