

The Necklace

By Guy de Maupassant

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BIOGRAPHY: GUY DE MAUPASSANT (1850–1893)

Guy de Maupassant grew up in the coastal region of Normandy, France, an environment that later influenced many of his stories. His parents separated when he was young, and he developed a close relationship with his mother, who encouraged his early interest in literature. As a young man, Maupassant was active and social, but his later life was marked by serious illness. He suffered from the long-term effects of syphilis, which led to chronic pain, hallucinations, and mental instability. His condition worsened in his early forties, and he died at the age of 42. While these details are significant, what matters most for understanding his writing is how his experiences contributed to his view of life as often fragile, unpredictable, and shaped by forces beyond individual control.

Maupassant's development as a writer was strongly influenced by his mentor, the novelist Gustave Flaubert. Flaubert trained him to observe carefully and to use precise language—what he called *le mot juste* (“the exact word”). This emphasis on clarity and precision became a defining feature of Maupassant's writing. Before achieving literary success, Maupassant worked as a government clerk in Paris. This experience exposed him to the routines and limitations of middle-class life, which he later portrayed in his fiction. His characters often reflect the concerns of ordinary people dealing with social expectations, financial pressure, and personal ambition. He rose to prominence with the publication of “Boule de Suif” in 1880 and went on to become one of the most widely read writers in France, producing hundreds of short stories along with novels and essays.

Maupassant is considered one of the founders of the modern short story. Writing within the Realist and Naturalist traditions, he focused on presenting life as it is rather than idealizing it. His writing is characterized by economy and precision. He practiced *le mot juste*, meaning that every word and detail in his stories serves a clear purpose. Because of this, his stories are tightly structured and carefully controlled. While Maupassant is widely known for his “twist endings,” these moments are not simply meant to surprise the reader. Instead, they reveal deeper, often uncomfortable truths about social class, money, and human behavior. His stories frequently expose the gap between how people see themselves and the reality of their situation.

Connection to *The Necklace*

The Necklace is one of Maupassant's most well-known stories and a clear example of his style and concerns. The story follows Mathilde Loisel, a woman who is dissatisfied with her social position and desires a life of wealth and luxury. As you read, pay attention to how carefully the story is constructed. Ask yourself: Why does Maupassant include each detail, and how do those details build toward the ending? Also consider Mathilde's motivations. How do her desires influence her decisions, and what does the outcome suggest about the relationship between appearance and reality?

Key Terms: The Burden of Appearance

- **Naturalism:** A literary movement that suggests that social conditions, heredity, and environment are powerful forces that shape human behavior. In this story, Mathilde is influenced—and limited—by her social position.
- **Situational Irony:** A contrast between what is expected to happen and what actually happens. In *The Necklace*, the irony centers on the difference between the perceived value of the necklace and its actual value. The plot builds carefully toward its final revelation. This ending forces the reader to reconsider everything that came before it. More importantly, the story shows how a single moment of vanity and a refusal to be honest can reshape a person's entire life. Through Mathilde's experience, Maupassant reveals the dangers of valuing appearance over reality and the influence of social expectations on individual choices.
- **Social Caste:** A system of dividing society into classes based on wealth, status, or occupation. In Maupassant's time, social position strongly influenced opportunities, and appearance could affect how individuals were judged.

Reading Strategy

As you read, pay attention to the sacrifices made by Monsieur Loisel compared to the desires of Mathilde Loisel. Ask yourself: Is Mathilde's suffering the result of her actual circumstances, or her refusal to accept them?

The Necklace

Part I

She was one of those pretty and charming girls born, as if by an error of fate, into a family of clerks. She had no dowry¹, no expectations, no means of becoming known, understood, loved or wedded by a man of wealth and distinction; and so she let herself be married to a minor official at the Ministry of Education.

She dressed plainly because she had never been able to afford anything better, but she was as unhappy as if she had once been wealthy. Women don't belong to a caste² or class; their beauty, grace, and natural charm take the place of birth and family. Natural delicacy, instinctive elegance and a quick wit determine their place in society, and make the daughters of commoners the equals of the very finest ladies.

10 She suffered endlessly, feeling she was entitled to all the delicacies and luxuries of life. She suffered because of the poorness of her house as she looked at the dirty walls, the worn-out chairs and the ugly curtains. All these things that another woman of her class would not even have noticed, tormented her and made her resentful. The sight of the little Brenton girl who did her housework filled her with terrible regrets and hopeless fantasies. She dreamed of silent antechambers³ hung with Oriental tapestries, lit from above by torches in bronze holders, while two tall footmen in knee-length breeches napped in huge armchairs, sleepy from the stove's oppressive warmth. She dreamed of vast living rooms furnished in rare old silks, elegant furniture loaded with priceless ornaments, and inviting smaller rooms, perfumed, made for afternoon chats with close friends - famous, sought after men, who all women envy and desire.

20 When she sat down to dinner at a round table covered with a three-day-old cloth opposite her husband who, lifting the lid off the soup, shouted excitedly, "Ah! Beef stew! What could be better," she dreamed of fine dinners, of shining silverware, of tapestries which peopled the walls with figures from another time and strange birds in fairy forests; she dreamed of delicious dishes served on wonderful plates, of whispered gallantries listened to with an inscrutable⁴ smile as one ate the pink flesh of a trout or the wings of a quail.

She had no dresses, no jewels, nothing; and these were the only things she loved. She felt she was made for them alone. She wanted so much to charm, to be envied, to be desired and sought after.

30 She had a rich friend, a former schoolmate at the convent, whom she no longer wanted to visit because she suffered so much when she came home. For whole days afterwards she would weep with sorrow, regret, despair and misery.

¹ **Dowry:** Property or money brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage.

² **Caste:** A social class of people who share similar wealth or status.

³ **Antechambers:** A small room leading to a larger, main room (often used as a waiting area).

⁴ **Inscrutable:** Impossible to understand or interpret.

Part II

One evening her husband came home with an air of triumph, holding a large envelope in his hand.

"Look," he said, "here's something for you."

She tore open the paper and drew out a card, on which was printed the words: "The Minister of Education and Mme. Georges Rampouneau request the pleasure of M. and Mme. Loisel's company at the Ministry, on the evening of Monday January 18th."

Instead of being delighted, as her husband had hoped, she threw the invitation on the table resentfully⁵, and muttered: "What do you want me to do with that?"

10 "But, my dear, I thought you would be pleased. You never go out, and it will be such a lovely occasion! I had awful trouble getting it. Every one wants to go; it is very exclusive, and they're not giving many invitations to clerks. The whole ministry will be there."

She stared at him angrily, and said, impatiently: "And what do you expect me to wear if I go?"

He hadn't thought of that. He stammered: "Why, the dress you go to the theatre in. It seems very nice to me..."

He stopped, stunned, distressed to see his wife crying. Two large tears ran slowly from the corners of her eyes towards the corners of her mouth. He stuttered: "What's the matter? What's the matter?"

20 With great effort she overcame her grief and replied in a calm voice, as she wiped her wet cheeks: "Nothing. Only I have no dress and so I can't go to this party. Give your invitation to a friend whose wife has better clothes than I do."

He was distraught⁶, but tried again: "Let's see, Mathilde. How much would a suitable dress cost, one which you could use again on other occasions, something very simple?"

She thought for a moment, computing the cost, and also wondering what amount she could ask for without an immediate refusal and an alarmed exclamation from the thrifty clerk.

At last she answered hesitantly: "I don't know exactly, but I think I could do it with four hundred francs."

He turned a little pale, because he had been saving that exact amount to buy a gun and treat himself to a hunting trip the following summer, in the country near Nanterre, with a few friends who went lark-shooting there on Sundays.

⁵ **Resentfully:** In this case, being petulant as in childishly sulky or bad-tempered.

⁶ **Distraught:** Deeply upset and agitated.

30 However, he said: "Very well, I can give you four hundred francs. But try and get a really beautiful dress."

Part III

The day of the party drew near, and Madame Loisel seemed sad, restless, anxious. Her dress was ready, however. One evening her husband said to her: "What's the matter? You've been acting strange these last three days."

She replied: "I'm upset that I have no jewels, not a single stone to wear. I will look cheap. I would almost rather not go to the party."

"You could wear flowers," he said, "They are very fashionable at this time of year. For ten francs you could get two or three magnificent roses."

She was not convinced.

"No; there is nothing more humiliating than looking poor in the middle of a lot of rich women."

10 "How stupid you are!" her husband cried. "Go and see your friend Madame Forestier and ask her to lend you some jewels. You know her well enough for that."

She uttered a cry of joy.

"Of course. I had not thought of that."

The next day she went to her friend's house and told her of her distress.

Madame Forestier went to her mirrored wardrobe, took out a large box, brought it back, opened it, and said to Madame Loisel: "Choose, my dear."

First she saw some bracelets, then a pearl necklace, then a gold Venetian cross set with precious stones, of exquisite craftsmanship. She tried on the jewelry in the mirror, hesitated, could not bear to part with them, to give them back. She kept asking: "You have nothing else?"

20 "Why, yes. But I don't know what you like."

Suddenly she discovered, in a black satin box, a superb diamond necklace, and her heart began to beat with uncontrolled desire. Her hands trembled as she took it. She fastened it around her neck, over her high-necked dress, and stood lost in ecstasy⁷ as she looked at herself.

Then she asked anxiously, hesitating: "Would you lend me this, just this?"

"Why, yes, of course."

She threw her arms around her friend's neck, embraced her rapturously, then fled with her treasure.

⁷ **Ecstasy:** An overwhelming feeling of great happiness or joyful excitement.

Part IV

The day of the party arrived. Madame Loisel was a success. She was prettier than all the other women, elegant, gracious, smiling, and full of joy. All the men stared at her, asked her name, tried to be introduced. All the cabinet officials wanted to waltz with her. The minister noticed her.

She danced wildly, with passion, drunk on pleasure, forgetting everything in the triumph of her beauty, in the glory of her success, in a sort of cloud of happiness, made up of all this respect, all this admiration, all these awakened desires, of that sense of triumph that is so sweet to a woman's heart.

10 She left at about four o'clock in the morning. Her husband had been dozing since midnight in a little deserted anteroom with three other gentlemen whose wives were having a good time.

He threw over her shoulders the clothes he had brought for her to go outside in, the modest clothes of an ordinary life, whose poverty contrasted sharply with the elegance of the ball dress. She felt this and wanted to run away, so she wouldn't be noticed by the other women who were wrapping themselves in expensive furs.

Loisel held her back.

"Wait a moment, you'll catch a cold outside. I'll go and find a cab."

But she would not listen to him, and ran down the stairs. When they were finally in the street, they could not find a cab, and began to look for one, shouting at the cabmen they saw passing in the distance.

20 They walked down toward the Seine in despair, shivering with cold. At last they found on the quay one of those old night cabs that one sees in Paris only after dark, as if they were ashamed to show their shabbiness during the day.

They were dropped off at their door in the Rue des Martyrs, and sadly walked up the steps to their apartment. It was all over, for her. And he was remembering that he had to be back at his office at ten o'clock.

In front of the mirror, she took off the clothes around her shoulders, taking a final look at herself in all her glory. But suddenly she uttered a cry. She no longer had the necklace round her neck!

"What is the matter?" asked her husband, already half undressed.

30 She turned towards him, panic-stricken.

"I have...I have...I no longer have Madame Forestier's necklace."

He stood up, distraught.

"What!...how!...That's impossible!"

They looked in the folds of her dress, in the folds of her cloak, in her pockets, everywhere. But they could not find it.

"Are you sure you still had it on when you left the ball?" he asked.

"Yes. I touched it in the hall at the Ministry."

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

"Yes. That's probably it. Did you take his number?"

40 "No. And you, didn't you notice it?"

"No."

They stared at each other, stunned. At last Loisel put his clothes on again.

"I'm going back," he said, "over the whole route we walked, see if I can find it."

He left. She remained in her ball dress all evening, without the strength to go to bed, sitting on a chair, with no fire, her mind blank.

Her husband returned at about seven o'clock. He had found nothing.

He went to the police, to the newspapers to offer a reward, to the cab companies, everywhere the tiniest glimmer of hope led him.

She waited all day, in the same state of blank despair from before this frightful disaster.

50 Loisel returned in the evening, a hollow, pale figure; he had found nothing.

"You must write to your friend," he said, "tell her you have broken the clasp of her necklace and that you are having it mended. It will give us time to look some more."

She wrote as he dictated.

Part V

At the end of one week they had lost all hope.

And Loisel, who had aged five years, declared: "We must consider how to replace the jewel."

The next day they took the box which had held it, and went to the jeweler whose name they found inside. He consulted his books.

"It was not I, madame, who sold the necklace; I must simply have supplied the case."

And so they went from jeweler to jeweler, looking for a necklace like the other one, consulting their memories, both sick with grief and anguish.

10 In a shop at the Palais Royal, they found a string of diamonds which seemed to be exactly what they were looking for. It was worth forty thousand francs. They could have it for thirty-six thousand.

So they begged the jeweler not to sell it for three days. And they made an arrangement that he would take it back for thirty-four thousand francs if the other necklace was found before the end of February.

Loisel had eighteen thousand francs which his father had left him. He would borrow the rest.

20 And he did borrow, asking for a thousand francs from one man, five hundred from another, five louis here, three louis there. He gave notes, made ruinous agreements, dealt with usurers⁸, with every type of money-lender. He compromised the rest of his life, risked signing notes without knowing if he could ever honor them, and, terrified by the anguish still to come, by the black misery about to fall on him, by the prospect of every physical privation and every moral torture he was about to suffer, he went to get the new necklace, and laid down on the jeweler's counter thirty-six thousand francs.

When Madame Loisel took the necklace back, Madame Forestier said coldly: "You should have returned it sooner, I might have needed it."

To the relief of her friend, she did not open the case. If she had detected the substitution, what would she have thought? What would she have said? Would she have taken her friend for a thief?

Part VI

From then on, Madame Loisel knew the horrible life of the very poor. But she played her part heroically. The dreadful debt must be paid. She would pay it. They dismissed their maid; they changed their lodgings; they rented a garret⁹ under the roof.

She came to know the drudgery of housework, the odious¹⁰ labors of the kitchen. She washed the dishes, staining her rosy nails on greasy pots and the bottoms of pans. She washed the dirty linen, the shirts and the dishcloths, which she hung to dry on a line; she carried the garbage down to the street every morning, and carried up the water, stopping at each landing to catch her breath. And, dressed like a commoner, she went to the fruiterer's, the grocer's, the butcher's, her basket on her arm, bargaining, insulted, fighting over every miserable sou¹¹.

10 Each month they had to pay some notes, renew others, get more time.

Her husband worked every evening, doing accounts for a tradesman, and often, late into the night, he sat copying a manuscript at five sous a page.

⁸ **Usurers:** People who lend money at unreasonably high rates of interest.

⁹ **Garret:** A small, wretched, and often cramped attic room.

¹⁰ **Odious:** Extremely unpleasant; repulsive.

¹¹ **Sou:** A French coin of very low value; a "penny."

And this life lasted ten years.

At the end of ten years they had paid off everything, everything, at usurer's rates and with the accumulations of compound interest.

Madame Loisel looked old now. She had become strong, hard and rough like all women of impoverished households. With hair half combed, with skirts awry, and reddened hands, she talked loudly as she washed the floor with great swishes of water. But sometimes, when her husband was at the office, she sat down near the window and thought of that evening at the ball so long ago, when she had been so beautiful and so admired.

What would have happened if she had not lost that necklace? Who knows, who knows? How strange life is, how fickle! How little is needed for one to be ruined or saved!

Part VII

One Sunday, as she was walking in the Champs Élysées to refresh herself after the week's work, suddenly she saw a woman walking with a child. It was Madame Forestier, still young, still beautiful, still charming.

Madame Loisel felt emotional. Should she speak to her? Yes, of course. And now that she had paid, she would tell her all. Why not?

She went up to her.

"Good morning, Jeanne."

The other, astonished to be addressed so familiarly by this common woman, did not recognize her. She stammered: "But - madame - I don't know. You must have made a mistake."

"No, I am Mathilde Loisel."

Her friend uttered a cry.

"Oh!...my poor Mathilde, how you've changed!"

"Yes, I have had some hard times since I last saw you, and many miseries...and all because of you!"

"Me? How can that be?"

"You remember that diamond necklace that you lent me to wear to the Ministry party?"

"Yes. Well?"

"Well, I lost it."

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

20 "I brought you back another exactly like it. And it has taken us ten years to pay for it. It wasn't easy for us, we had very little. But at last it is over, and I am very glad."

Madame Forestier was stunned.

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

"Yes; you didn't notice then? They were very similar."

And she smiled with proud and innocent pleasure.

Madame Forestier, deeply moved, took both her hands.

"Oh, my poor Mathilde! Mine was an imitation! It was worth five hundred francs at most!"

The End

GUIDED READING & THINKING: "THE NECKLACE"

I. The Setup (Fantasy vs. Reality)

- Notice the Narrative Voice: Maupassant says Mathilde was born into a family of clerks "as if by an error of fate." Think: Does the narrator truly agree that she belongs in a higher class, or is he mocking her self-importance?
- The Contrast: Compare Mathilde's "dream" dinners (shining silverware, fairy forests) with her real dinner (three-day-old cloth, beef stew). Inference: Why does she "suffer" from things that a woman of her class "would not even have noticed"?

II. The Sacrifice (The Invitation and the Debt)

- 10
- The Husband's Sacrifice: Monsieur Loisel gives Mathilde 400 francs for a dress—the exact amount he had saved for a personal hunting trip. Think: What does this reveal about the power dynamic in their marriage? Who is actually making the sacrifices in this household?
 - The Borrowed Identity: Mathilde refuses to go to the ball without jewels because she fears looking "cheap" among rich women. Inference: Why does she choose the diamond necklace specifically? What does a "diamond" represent to her that flowers or other gems do not?

III. The Turning Point (The Triumph and the Panic)

- 20
- The Cloud of Happiness: During the ball, Mathilde is "drunk on pleasure" and "forgetting everything." Notice: Why does she run away at 4:00 AM? What is she trying to hide, and from whom?
 - The Refusal to be Honest: After losing the necklace, the Loisels lie to Madame Forestier, claiming the clasp is being mended. Thinking Prompt: How would the story have changed if Mathilde had simply told her friend the truth that morning? Why is "shame" a more powerful motivator for her than "truth"?

IV. The Grind (The Ten-Year Debt)

- The Physical Transformation: Look at the description of Mathilde after ten years of labor (reddened hands, skirts awry, loud voice). Notice: Maupassant says she played her part "heroically." Inference: In what way did losing the necklace actually make Mathilde a "stronger" person? Is she more or less "virtuous" now than she was at the start of the story?

30

V. The Resolution (The Final Twist)

- The Final Meeting: When Mathilde finally tells Jeanne the truth, she does so with "proud and innocent pleasure." Think: Why does she feel pride? Does she believe her ten years of suffering were a fair trade for one night of glory?
- The Irony of the Ending: The revelation that the necklace was "paste" (fake) changes the meaning of the last ten years. Critical Thinking: If the necklace was fake, was the "triumph" Mathilde felt at the ball also fake? What is Maupassant saying about the pursuit of social status?