THE NECKLACE

She was one of those attractive pretty girls, born by a freak of

fortune in a lower-middle-class family. She had no dowry, no

expectations, no way of getting known, appreciated, loved and

married by some wealthy gentleman of good family. And she

allowed herself to be married to a junior clerk in the Ministry of

Public Instruction.

She dressed plainly, having no money to spend on herself. But

she was as unhappy as if she had known better days. Women have

no sense of caste or breeding, their beauty, their grace, and their

charm taking the place of birth and family. Their natural refine-

ment, their instinctive delicacy and adaptability are their only pass-

port to society, and these qualities enable daughters of the people

to compete with ladies of gentle birth.

She always had a sense of frustration, feeling herself born for

all the lefmomt'nts and luxuries of life. She hated the bareness of

her flat, the shabbiness of the walls, the worn upholstery of the

chaiis, and the ugliness of the curtains. All these things, which

another woman of her class would not even have noticed, were pain

and grief to her. The sight of the little Breton maid doing her

simple housework aroused in her passionate regrets and hopeless

dreams. She imagined hushed ante-rooms hung with oriental

fabrics and lit by tall bronze candelabra, with two impressive foot-

men in knee-breeches dozing in great armchairs, made drowsy by

the heat of radiators. She imagined vast drawing-rooms, uphol-

stered in antique silk, splendid pieces of furniture littered with

priceless curios, and dainty scented boudoirs, designed for tea-time

conversation with intimate friends and much sought-after society

gentlemen, whose attentions every woman envies and desires.

When she sat down to dinner at the round table covered with a

three-days-old cloth opposite her husband, who took the lid off

the casserole with the delighted exclamation: 'Ah hot-pot again!

How lovely! It's the best dish in the world!’, she was dreaming of

luxurious dinners with gleaming silver and tapestries peopling the

walls with classical figures and exotic birds in a fairy forest; she

dreamt of exquisite dishes served on valuable china and whispered

compliments listened to with a sphinx-like smile, while toying with

the pink flesh of a trout or the wing of a hazel-hen.

She had a rich friend who had been with her at a convent school,

but she did not like going to see her now, the contrast was so

painful when she went home. She spent whole days in tears;

misery regrets, hopeless longings caused her such bitter distress.

One evening her husband came home with a broad smile on his

face and a large envelope in his hand: 'Look!’ he cried. Here's

something for you, dear!’

She tore open the envelope eagerly and pulled out a printed card

with the words: ‘The Minister of Public Instruction and Mme

Georges Ilamponneau request the honour of the company of

M. and Mme Loisel at the Ministry on the evening of Monday,

January 8th.’

Instead of being delighted as ha husband had hoped, she threw

the invitation pettishly down on the table, murmuring:' ‘What’s

the good of this to me?’

‘But I thought you’d be pleased, dear! You never go out and

this is an occasion, a great occasion. I had the greatest difficulty to

gel the invitation. Everybody wants one; it’s very select and junior

clerks don’t often get asked. The whole official world will be there.’

She looked at him crossly and declared impatiently: ‘What do

you think I’m to wear?’

He hadn’t thought of that and stuttered: ‘Why the frock you

wear for the theatre. I think it’s charming!’

He stopped in astonished bewilderment when he saw his wife

was crying. Two great tears were running slowly down from the

corners of her eyes to the comers of her mouth; he stammered:

‘What’s the matter? What’s the matter?’

But with a great effort she had controlled her disappointment

and replied quietly, drying her wet cheeks; ‘Oh! Nothing! Only

not having anything to wrar I can’t go to the party. Pass on the

invitation to some colleague wliosc wife is better dressed tlian L’

‘Look here, Mathilde! How n uch would a suitable frock cost,

something quite simple that would be useful on other occasions

later

She thought for a few seconds, doing a sum and also wondering

how much she could ask for without inviting an immediate refusal

and an outraged exclamation fiom the close-fisted cleik At last

with some hesitation ohe replied: ‘I don’t know exactly but I think

I could manage on four hundred fiancs.’

He w( nt slightly pale, for this was ]ust the amount he had pur by

to get a gun so that he could enjoy some shooting the following

summer on ihe Nanteire plain with some friends who went out

lark-shooting on Sundays. But he said. ‘Right! I’ll give you four

hundred francs, but ti} and get a really nice frock.\*

The date of the party was approaching and Mme Loisel seemed

depressed and worried, though her dress was ready One evening

her husband said to her: ‘Wliat’s the matter.^ The last three days

3-ou\*ve noi been yourself \*

She icphed. ‘It’s rotten not to have d piece of jewellery, not a

stone of any kind, to wear. I shall look po\erty-strickcn. I’d rather

not go to the party.’

He answered; ‘But you can wear some reil flowers. That’s very

smait this year. For ten fiancs you could get tw o or three magnih-

ctnt roses.’

She was not impressed. ‘No, there’s notliing moie humiliaung

than to look poor in a crowd of we ilthy women.\*

But her husband suddenly cned; ‘Whar a fool you are! Go to

your friend, Mme Forestier, and ask her to lend you some of her

jewellery. You know her well enough to do that.\*

She uttered a joyful cry: ‘ That’s a good idea! I’d never thought

of It!’

THE NECKLACE 59

Next day she went to her fnend’s house and explained her

dilemma.

Mme Forestier went to a glass-fronted waidiobe, rook out a

large casket, brought it over, opened it, and said to Mme Loisel

‘Take what you like, my dear!\*

First she looked at bracelets, then a pearl collar, then a Venetian

Cl OSS in gold and stones, a lovely piece of work She tried the

ous ornaments in front of the glass, unabit to make up her

mind to take them off and put them back, slic kept asking\* ‘IIaven\*t

} cu got ail} dung else?’

‘Yes, go on looking, 1 don’t know w hat }ou would like \*

Suddenly she found a black satin case containing a magnificent

di imond necklace, and she wintcd ii so dt pintelv tint her^icait

Lvg into thump Her hands wcie shaking, as she picked it up She

pi t u louncl her ihioat o\tr her high blouse and stood in ecstasy

before hrr reflection in the glass I hen he a ked hisitnntly, her

wUixitt} shosvtng in htr \oiee. ‘Could }ou lend me that, )ust that,

nothing else

‘But of course.’

She threw her aims round her friend’s neck and kissed her

wildly, and hurried home with her treasure.

The day of the party arrived. Mme Loisel had a triumph She

was the prettiest woman in the room, elegant, graceful, smiling, in

the seventh heaven of happiness All the men looked at her, asked

who she was, and wanted to be introduced. All the private secretaries

wanted to dance with her. The Minister himself noticed her.

She danced with inspired abandon, intoxicated with delight,

thinking of nothing in the triumph of her beauty and the glory of

her success, she was wrapped in a cloud of happiness, the result of

all the compliments, all the admiration, all these awakened desires,

that wonderful success so dear to every woman’s heart.

She left about four in the morning. Her husband had been dozing

since midnight m a small, empty drawing-room with tliree other

gentlemen, whose wives were also enjoying themselves.

He threw over her shoulders the wraps he had brought for going

home, her simple everyday coat, whose plainness clashed with the

smartness of her ball dress. She was conscious of this and wanted

to hurry away, so as not to be noticed by the ladies who were

putting on expensive fur wraps.

Loisel tried to stop her: ‘Wait a minute! You’ll catch cold out-

side. I’ll call a cab.’

But she would not listen and ran down the stairs. When they got

into the street they could not find a cab and began to hunt for one,

shouting to the drivers they saw passing in the distance In despair

they went down towards the Seine, shivering. At last, on the

Embankment they found one of those old broughams that ply by

night and are only seen in Pans after dark, as li ashamed of then

shabbiness in the daytime. It took them back to their house in the

Rue des Martyrs and they went sadly up to their flat. For her this

was the end, and he was remembering that he had pot to be at the

office at ten o’clock.

She took off the wraps she had put round her shoulders, standing

in front of the glass to see herself once more in all her glory. But

suddenly she uttered a cry, the diamond necklace was no longer

round her neck, Her husband, already half undressed, asked:

‘What’s the matter?’

She turned to him in a panic. \*Mme Forestier’s necklace has

gone^’

He stood up, dumbfounded ‘What? What do you mean? It’s

Impossible’

They searched in the folds of her dress, in the folds of her cloak,

m the pockets, everywhere, they could not find it He asked; ‘Are

you sure you had it on when you left the ball?’

‘Yes, I fingered it in the hall at the Ministry.’

‘But, if you had lost it in die street, we should have heard it drop.

It must be m the cab.’

‘Yes, it probably is. Did you take the number?’

‘No! And you didn’t notice it, I suppose?’

They looked at each other, utterly crushed. Finally Loisel

dressed again: I’ll go back along the way we walked and see if I

can find it.’

He went out and she remained in her evening dress, without the

strength even to go to bed, collapsed on a chair, without a fire, her

mind a blank.

Her husband returned about seven, having found nothing. He

went to the police station, to the papers to offer a reward, to the

cab companies, in fact anywhere that gave a flicker of hope.

She waited all day in the same state of dismay at this appalling

catastrophe. Loisel came back in the evening, his face pale and

lined; he had discovered nothing.

‘You must write to your friend he said, ‘and say you have

broken the clasp of the necklace and are getting it mended. That

will give us time to turn round.’

So she wrote at his dictation. After a week they had lost all hope

and Loisel, who had aged five years, declared: We must do

something about replacing it.’

Next day they took the case which had contained the necklace

to the jeweller whose name was in it. He looked up his books: I

did not supply the jewel, Madame; I must only have supplied the case.’

They went from jeweller to jeweller, looking for a necklace like

the other, trying to remember exactly w: at it was like, both of

them sick with worry and anxiety.

At last in the Palais-Royal they found a diamond necklace just

like the one lost. Its price was forty thousand francs, but they could

have it for thirty-six thousand.

So they asked the jeweller to keep it for three days. They made

it a condition that he should take it back for- thirty-four thousand

if the first was found before the end of February.

Loisel had got eighteen thousand francs which his father had left

him; lie would borrow the rest.

He borrowed one thousand francs from one, five hundred from

another, one hundred here, sixty there. He gave I.O.U.s and notes

of hand on ruinous terms, going to the Jews and money-lenders of

every kind. He mortgaged the whole of the rest of his life, risked

his signature on bills without knowing if he would ever be able to

honor it; he was tormented with anxiety about the future, with

the thought of the crushing poverty about to descend upon him

and the prospect of physical privations and mental agony. Then he

went and collected the necklace, putting down the thirty-six

thousand francs on the jeweller’s counter.

When Mme Loisel look the necklace back to Mme Forestier, the

latter said rather coldly: ‘You ought to have brought it back

sooner; I might have wanted it.’

She did not open the case, as her friend had feared she might. If

she had detected the replacement what would she have thought?

What would she have said? Would she have considered her a thief?

Now Mme Loisel learnt to know the grim life of the very poor.

However she faced die position with heroic courage. This ghastly

debt must be paid and she would pay it. They got lid of the maid;

they gave up the flat and took an attic under the tiles. She did all

the heavy work of the house as well as the hateful kitchen jobs.

She washed up, ruining her pink nails on the coarse crockery and

the bottoms of the saucepans. She washed the dirty linen and shuts

and the kitchen cloths and dried them on a line. She carried the

rubbish down to the street every morning and brought up the

water, stopping on every floor to get her breath. And dressed as a

woman of the people, she went to the fruiterer, the grocer and the

butcher with her basket on her arm, bargaining in spite of their

rudeness and fighting for every penny of her miserable pittance.

Every month some notes of hand had to be paid off and others

renewed to gain time. Her husband worked in the evening keeping

a tradesman’s books and often at night he did copying at twenty-

five centimes a page. This life went on for ten years.

After ten years they had paid everything back, including the

interest and the accumulated compound interest.

Mme Loisel now looked an old woman. She had become the

strong, tough, coarse woman we find in the homes of the poor.

Her hair was neglected, her skirt was askew, her hands were red

and her voice loud; she even scrubbed the floors. But sometimes,

when her husband was at the office, she would sit down near the

window and dream of that evening long ago, the ball at which she

had been such a success.

What would have happened to her if she had not lost the neck-

lace? Who can say? Life is such a strange thing with its changes and

chances. Such a little thing can make or mar it!

One Sunday, when she had gone for a stroll in the Champs-

- Elysses as a change from the week's grind, she suddenly saw a lady

taking a child for a walk. It was Mme Forestier, still young till

beautiful, still attractive.

Mme Loisel felt a wave of emotion. Should she speak to her?

Yes, she would. Now that she had paid, she would tell her every-

thing. Why not?

She went up to her: ‘Good morning, Jeanne!’

The other woman did not recognize her, surprised at being

addressed in this familiar fashion by a common woman; she

stammered: ‘But, Madame ... I don’t know you . . . there must

be some mistake.’

‘No! Tm Mathilde Loisel!’

Her friend exclaimed: ‘Oh! Poor Mathilde, how you’ve

changed!’

‘Yes, I’ve had a pretty grim time since I saw you last, with lots of

trouble - and it was all your fault!’

‘My fault? What do you mean?’

‘You lemember that diamond necklace you lent me to go to the

party at the Ministry?’

‘Yes, what about it?’

‘Well! I lost it!’

‘What! But you brought it back to me.’

‘I brought you back another exactly like it; and for ten years

we’ve been paying for it. You’ll realize it hasn’t been easy, for we

had no money of our own. Well, now it’s all over and Fm jolly

glad!’

Mme Forestier had stopped: ‘You say you bought a diamond

necklace to replace mine?’

‘Yes! And you never spotted it, did you? They were as like as

two peas.’

And she smiled with simple proud pleasure.

Mme Forestier, deeply moved, took both her hands. ‘Oh! m}

poor Mathilde! Rut mine was only paste, not worth more than

five hundred francs at most!’