

THE DIAMOND NECKLACE.

BY GUY DE MAUPASSANT.

She was one of those beautiful girls, born as if by mistake of destiny, into a family of labourers. She had no dowry, no prospects, no way of becoming known, loved, and married by a rich and distinguished man; and she gave her hand to a petty clerk of the Bureau of Public Instruction.

She was as wretched as a disinherited princess. A woman's beauty and grace take the place of birth and family. Her native refinement, her instinct for elegance, her fair face, the seal of royalty, and make a daughter of the people equal with the greatest lady.

She suffered constantly from the wretchedness of her abode, the bareness of its walls, the age and ugliness of its furnishings. She dreamed of silent ante-chambers, hung with Oriental stuffs, and lighted with lofty bronze lamps; of great drawing-rooms draped with antique silks, and of coquetish, perfumed little parlours, for long and intimate talks with close friends.

When she sat before the round table, covered with a thrice-used cloth, opposite her husband, who uncovered the soup-tureen with the delighted exclamation, "Ah, good soup! there is nothing better!" she thought of delicate dinners, of gleaming plate, of tapestries to people the walls with ancient personages and strange birds in the depths of enchanted forests; she thought of whispered gallantries received with a mysterious smile, while the fair listener partook of the rosy flesh of a trout or a woodcock's wings.

She had no dresses, no jewels, nothing; and that was all she cared for—all she was made for. She had an irresistible longing to charm, to be envied, admired, and courted. She spent days in weeping with regret and despair.

One evening her husband came home with a proud look bearing a card of invitation to a ball at the residence of the Minister of Public Instruction.

Instead of being delighted, as he had hoped, she threw the invitation spitefully to the floor, murmuring:

"What do you expect me to do with it?"

"Why, my dear, I thought you would be pleased. You never go out, and this will be a fine opportunity. I have been at infinite pains to get it."

She looked at him with irritation, and demanded impatiently:

"What do you expect me to put on my back?"

He had not thought of that. He stammered:

"Why, the dress you wore to the theatre. It looks very well to me."

He stopped, stupefied, overwhelmed, at seeing his wife in tears. Two great drops rolled slowly from the corners of her eyes to the corners of her mouth.

"What is the matter, dear?" he began.

But by a desperate effort she overcame her distress and answered calmly, as she wiped her wet cheeks:

"Nothing. Only I have no dress, and consequently I cannot go to this ball. Give the card to some friend whose wife is better fitted out than I."

He was in despair. He tried once more:

"Let us see Mathilde. How much would a suitable dress cost; something simple, which would be useful to you on other occasions?"

She reflected a few seconds, counting up the sum, taking also into the question the amount which she could ask for without calling forth an immediate refusal from her economical husband.

At last she replied, hesitatingly:

"I can not tell exactly, but it seems to me that I could get along with 400 francs."

He turned quite pale, for he had saved just that sum, intending to buy a gun and join some hunting parties the following summer. He replied, however:

"Very well. I will give you 400 francs. But you must get a handsome dress."

The day of the ball drew near and Mathilde seemed sad and anxious. She had not been like herself for three days. To her husband's inquiry as to what troubled her she replied:

"I have no jewels, not a single stone to wear. I shall make a very mean appearance. I had almost rather not go at all."

But he exclaimed:

"How foolish you are! Go to your friend, Mme. Forestier, and ask her to lend you some jewels. You are quite intimate enough with her to do that."

The next day accordingly, she told her perplexity to her friend.

Mme. Forestier brought a large case from her cabinet, and told Mathilde to take her choice.

She looked at bracelets, at a pearl necklace, and a venetian cross. She tried on the jewels before the mirror, and could not make up her mind to give them up. She kept asking:

"Have you not something else?"

Suddenly she discovered in a black satin box a magnificent chain of diamonds, and her heart began to beat with moderate desire. She seized it with trembling hands. She clasped it around her throat, over her high dress, and looked at herself in ecstasy. Then she asked, hesitating, full of trouble:

"Can you lend me that, only that?"

"Why, yes; certainly."

She rushed to her friend, embraced her passionately, then bore her treasure away.

At the ball Mathilde was prettier than all the others, elegant, graceful, smiling, and intoxicated with pleasure. All the men looked at her, asked her name, and begged to be presented to her. She danced with abandon, in the triumph of her beauty, in a sort of cloud of happiness.

She left about four o'clock in the morning. Her husband threw over her shoulders the wraps he had brought, modest garments of every-day life, which assorted but poorly with the elegance of her ball toilet. She felt this, and wished to escape without being noticed by the other ladies, who were wrapping themselves in rich furs. Her husband tried to restrain her, but she was already rapidly descending the stair. When they came into the street

no carriages were visible. They walked shivering toward the Seine. At last they found on a wharf one of those old couples, seen only after midnight in Paris. It brought them to their own door, and they entered gloomily. For her it was all ended. He was thinking that he must be at his desk at 10 o'clock.

She took the wrappings from her shoulders before her mirror that she might see herself once more in her glory. Suddenly she gave a cry and turned to her husband in distraction. There was no necklace about her neck. They looked in the folds of her dress and cloak, in her pockets, everywhere. They did not find it.

"You are sure you had it when you left the ball?" he asked.

"Yes; I had my hand on it in the vestibule."

"If you had dropped it in the street we would have heard it fall. It must be in the cab."

"Yes, that is most likely. Did you take the number?"

"No, didn't you notice it?"

"No."

They looked at each other in consternation and Loeisel began to dress.

"I will go over the whole distance we walked," said he, "to see if I can find it."

"No."

He went out. She sank into a chair and remained there in evening dress, without fire, without strength to go to bed.

Her husband returned about 7 o'clock. He had found nothing.

He went out again, and she waited all day in the same state of terror before this fearful disaster.

Loeisel returned at night with a pale and hollow face. He had found nothing.

"You must write to your friend," said he, "that you have broken the clasp of the necklace, and have sent it to be repaired. That will give us time to turn around!"

At the end of a week they had lost all hope. Loeisel, looking five years older, declared:

"We must contrive to replace the necklace."

The next day they took the box which had contained it, and went from shop to shop, with chagrin and anxiety, looking for a necklace like the lost one. They found at length a chaplet of diamonds which appeared to them exactly what they wanted. It was worth thirty-four thousand francs. They begged the jeweller not to sell it for three days, and made the condition that it should be taken back if the lost one should have been found before the end of February. Loeisel's father had left him 18,000 francs—the rest he would have to borrow. He obtained 1,000 francs from one man, 500 from another, five louis here and three louis there, he incurred ruinous obligations with the whole race of usurers. He risked his signature without the least idea whether he would be able to honour it; and oppressed by anguish in view of the future, by the black poverty he saw settling down upon them, by the prospect of all physical privations and mental tortures, he called for the new necklace, counting out to the merchant 4,000 francs.

When Mme. Loeisel took the necklace to Mme. Forestier the latter said with annoyance:

"You ought to have returned it sooner; I might have wanted it."

But she did not open the casket.

Mathilde now became acquainted with the life of the necessitous. She took up her share of the burden heroically. She was going to help pay this frightful debt. She dismissed her servant and changed her lodgings for an attic. She learned to perform the coarse and odious tasks of the kitchen. She washed the dishes, and wore her rags and rags to the quick on the bottoms of grey kettles. She washed the soiled linen and dried it on a cord at the window. She carried the ashes and sweepings to the street every morning, and carried up water, stopping at each landing of the stairs to breathe. She went to the grocer and the butcher, her basket on her arm, defending her miserable money, son by son.

Her husband worked evenings, clearing a merchant's accounts, and often did copying at five sous a page.

This life lasted ten years. At the end of that time they had paid all, with accumulated interest.

Mathilde looked old now. She had become the rude, strong, hardened woman of the poor, with unkempt hair, rough hands, and gown awry. She talked loud and scrubbed floors with great splashing of water. But at times, when her husband was out, she sat before the window and dreamed of that ball so long ago, where she had been so lovely and so admired.

What would she have been had she not lost the necklace! Who can tell! How small a thing can make or mar a destiny!

One Sunday as she was taking a quiet stroll, she noticed a lady leading a child. It was Madame Forestier, still young and lovely. Should she speak to her? Yes; certainly. And since it was all paid she would tell her the whole story. She drew near.

"Good day, Jeanne!"

But the other was astonished to be so familiarly addressed by a peasant woman, and stammered:

"Why! Madame, I do not know—"

"You must be mistaken."

"No; I am Mathilde Loeisel."

"Her friend uttered a cry:

"Oh! my poor Mathilde! how you are changed!"

"Yes; I have seen hard days since I met you last, and many privations—and all because of you."

"Because of me! How so, pray?"

"Do you remember the diamond necklace you lent me to wear to the ball? Well, I lost it."

"Lost it! Why, you brought it back to me."

"I brought you back another just like it. We have been ten years paying for it. You can see that it was not easy for us who had nothing. It is over at last, and I am in a measure content."

"You bought a necklace to replace mine?"

"Yes. You didn't notice it, did you? They were just alike."

Mme. Forestier seized both her hands with much emotion.

"Oh, my poor Mathilde! Mine were false. They were worth at the most 500 francs!"

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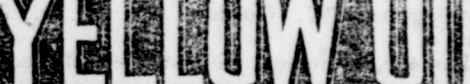
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