

The Necklace by Guy de Maupassant (1884)

Adapted for English Language Learners—Advanced Version (Level B2+)

Dreams and Disappointment

Mathilde Loisel possessed the kind of beauty that made strangers pause on busy streets, yet fate had placed her in the modest apartment of a government clerk. Born without fortune, she had married Monsieur Loisel—a kind man whose greatest ambition was her happiness. Their small home was clean but simple, and to Mathilde and her dreams, it felt like a prison.

She would run her fingers along their rough wooden table and imagine polished mahogany. She would stare at their earthenware plates and dream of fine china painted with roses. Each morning brought the harsh reality of cheap furniture and faded wallpaper, while her mind dwelled on silk-draped salons where elegant ladies glided through crystal-lit ballrooms.

Her one connection to that glittering world was Madame Jeanne Forestier, a school friend who had married well. Mathilde rarely visited Jeanne's elegant home on the Champs-Élysées, for each encounter left her feeling smaller and more resentful. The Persian rugs and crystal chandeliers only emphasized what her own life lacked.

Monsieur Loisel, observing his wife's unhappiness, tried desperately to lift her spirits with small gifts—pastries, wildflowers, amusing stories from the Ministry. But Mathilde barely glanced at these offerings, her mind dwelling on grander possibilities that seemed forever beyond her reach.

The Invitation

One gray February evening, Monsieur Loisel burst through their door with unusual excitement, waving a cream-colored envelope. "My dear Mathilde, the Minister of Education is hosting a grand reception at the Palais des Tuileries! My supervisor has given me this invitation—it was extremely difficult to obtain."

Instead of joy, Mathilde's face grew pale and her eyes, angry. "What do you expect me to wear? I have nothing—no suitable gown, no proper jewels. I would appear among those refined ladies like a sparrow among peacocks."

Her husband's face fell, but he spoke with gentle determination. "How much would an appropriate dress cost?"

"Four hundred francs," she whispered, hardly daring to speak the sum aloud.

Mathilde knew that was exact amount Monsieur Loisel had saved so that he might buy a new hunting rifle. However, seeing his wife's distress, he nodded without hesitation. "Very well. You shall have your dress."

The following weeks brought transformation. Mathilde chose silk the color of midnight sky, cut in the latest fashion with delicate beadwork. When she tried on the completed gown, she became the elegant woman she had always known herself to be.

Yet as the evening approached, her excitement faded. Her husband, noticing her dull eyes and solemn face, asked, "What is wrong, dear?"

"I have no jewelry," Mathilde lamented. "A lady is nothing without proper ornaments."

"Perhaps you could borrow something from Madame Forestier?" her husband suggested.

The idea struck Mathilde like lightning. Why had she not thought of this herself?

The River of Stars

The next morning, Mathilde traveled to Jeanne Forestier's mansion, where servants led her through rooms filled with art treasures and French antiques. Jeanne received her warmly, and when Mathilde explained about the invitation, she clapped her hands in delight.

"How wonderful! You must borrow something magnificent."

She led Mathilde to her dressing room, where an enormous jewelry case sat open like a treasure chest. Inside lay emerald bracelets, pearl earrings, ruby brooches, and diamond rings that sparkled like stars. Then, in a small black velvet box, Mathilde discovered something extraordinary—a diamond necklace of exceptional beauty.

When Mathilde lifted it, the diamonds seemed to flow like a river of stars. As Madame Forestier fastened the clasp, Mathilde watched her transformation in the mirror. She no longer saw a clerk's wife, but a woman of distinction and elegance.

"It's perfect," Madame Forestier observed. "You were born to wear jewels like these."

"Might I borrow this for the reception?" Mathilde asked.

"Of course, my dear friend," her benefactress replied without hesitation.

Mathilde left in a dream, the jewelry case pressed against her coat, her heart beating with excitement. At last, she would be ready for one magical evening.

One Perfect Night

The palace blazed with light, its grand ballrooms filled with the cream of Parisian society. Crystal chandeliers cast rainbows across polished marble floors, while an orchestra played waltzes. The air was perfumed with exotic flowers and filled with the music of multilingual conversation.

As Mathilde climbed the sweeping staircase, she felt every eye upon her. Distinguished gentlemen requested introductions, elegant ladies admired her gown, and several asked

about her magnificent necklace. She danced with cabinet ministers and foreign ambassadors, her feet barely touching the ground.

"Madame Loisel," murmured a Russian count, "you are the most enchanting woman in all of Paris tonight."

For hours, Mathilde lived within her dreams. She sipped champagne from crystal glasses, tasted delicacies she had only read about, and conversed with surprising wit and charm. She forgot the small apartment and daily struggles—for this one perfect night, she belonged in this world of beauty and refinement.

The clock struck four before the evening ended. Not wanting to be seen in her shabby wrap among the rich furs, Mathilde and her husband left quickly. They found an old carriage and rode through the silent city as the magical evening disappeared behind them.

At home, she stood before their small mirror for one last look at her transformed self. She reached up to unfasten the diamond necklace—and her hands found nothing but bare skin.

The necklace was gone.

The Search and the Price

Terror struck Mathilde like a thunderbolt. They searched frantically through her clothing, every pocket, every inch of their room. Nothing.

Monsieur Loisel retraced their route through the snowy streets with a lantern, searched the palace ballroom, visited the police, and placed notices in newspapers offering a reward. For a week, they lived in agony, questioning flower sellers, street sweepers, examining every inch of pavement. The necklace had vanished completely.

Finally, they faced the terrible truth: they would have to replace it.

They spent another week visiting every jeweler in Paris. At last, in a small shop near the Palais-Royal, they found an identical necklace. The price was thirty-six thousand francs—more than ten years of Monsieur Loisel's salary.

They used his inheritance of eighteen thousand francs, then borrowed the rest at crushing interest rates. He signed papers that would bind them for decades, promising monthly payments that would consume nearly every franc they earned.

With trembling hands and a heavy heart, Mathilde returned the replacement to Madame Forestier, who accepted it without opening the case.

Ten Years of Struggle

The debt changed everything. They moved to a tiny room under the roof of a decrepit building. Mathilde learned the harsh realities of poverty—her soft hands grew red and rough from scrubbing floors and carrying water up five flights of stairs. She learned to bargain at markets for scraps, to make soup from bones, to mend clothes until they were more patches than original fabric.

Her husband worked his Ministry job by day, then spent evenings copying documents for extra francs. He worked long into the night, his eyes burning from strain.

The woman who had once wept over chipped plates learned to create meals from nothing, to find pride in honest work, to face each day without self-pity. Her beauty changed—the softness vanished, replaced by the lean strength of endurance.

Ten years passed like a slow river of great struggles and small victories. On Sundays, Mathilde would walk to the Seine and remember that magical night, treasuring it as something beautiful that had briefly illuminated her life.

The Final Truth

On a bright Sunday morning in spring, Mathilde walked through the Tuileries Gardens where fashionable families promenaded. Her dress was clean but patched, her hands showed the wear of hard work, and her face bore the marks of ten difficult years.

Near the fountain, she saw her old friend, Madame Jeanne Forestier—still elegant, still beautiful, hardly changed. For a moment, Mathilde hesitated. Then she approached her former friend.

"Good morning, Jeanne."

Madame Forestier looked puzzled, studying the worn woman before her. "I'm sorry, but I don't believe we've been introduced..."

"It's me, Jeanne. Mathilde Loisel."

Recognition dawned slowly, followed by shock. "Mathilde! Oh, how you've changed!"

With the directness that hardship had taught her, Mathilde told the entire story: the lost necklace, the replacement, the debt, the decade of sacrifice.

Madame Forestier stood frozen, her face growing pale. When Mathilde finished, Jeanne reached out and took both her hands.

"Oh, my poor Mathilde," she whispered, her voice breaking. "The necklace you lost... it was artificial. The diamonds were glass, the setting was silver plate. The entire piece was worth no more than five hundred francs."