

Footprints Without Feet

(Class X – NCERT)

Chapter 7: The Necklace – Guy de Maupassant

Detailed Summary (Expanded, Exam-Oriented)

The story "The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant is a masterpiece of irony that explores themes of vanity, pride, social class, and the devastating consequences of dishonesty. Set in 19th century Paris, it tells the tragic story of a beautiful woman whose obsession with appearances ruins her life.

Mathilde Loisel is a pretty, charming woman born into a modest, middle-class family. By what she considers an error of fate, she has married a simple clerk who works in the Ministry of Education. Her husband, Monsieur Loisel, is a kind, hardworking man who does his best to make his wife happy, but he is not wealthy.

They live in a modest apartment with simple furnishings and one maid. But Mathilde is deeply unhappy with her life. She believes she was meant for luxury and high society. She dreams constantly of grand mansions, expensive furniture, exquisite jewelry, fashionable clothes, and being admired by wealthy men.

Every aspect of her actual life causes her suffering. When she sits at dinner, eating simple food served on everyday dishes, she imagines lavish banquets with silver service and exotic delicacies. She has a wealthy school friend, Madame Forestier, but avoids visiting her because seeing her friend's luxurious lifestyle makes her own situation feel unbearably worse.

One evening, Monsieur Loisel comes home with great excitement. He has managed to obtain an invitation to a prestigious ball at the Ministry - a rare and exclusive event. He has sacrificed this invitation, which could have gone to his colleagues, specifically hoping to please his wife and give her a taste of the elegant life she craves.

But instead of being delighted, Mathilde throws the invitation down and begins to cry. When her confused husband asks what is wrong, she explains that she has nothing appropriate to wear. She refuses to attend and look poor among all the wealthy women in their expensive gowns.

Heartbroken but devoted, Monsieur Loisel asks how much a suitable dress would cost. Mathilde calculates that four hundred francs would buy a modest but decent gown. This is exactly the amount Monsieur Loisel had been saving to buy himself a hunting gun - his one planned pleasure. Without hesitation, he gives up his dream and tells his wife to buy the dress.

As the ball approaches, Mathilde has her dress but remains unhappy. When her husband asks what is wrong, she says she will look ridiculous without jewelry. She would rather not go at all than

appear poor. Monsieur Loisel suggests wearing flowers, which would be elegant, but Mathilde finds this idea humiliating.

Finally, he suggests she borrow jewelry from her wealthy friend Madame Forestier. Mathilde brightens at this idea. The next day, she visits Madame Forestier, who generously opens her jewelry box and invites Mathilde to choose whatever she likes.

Mathilde looks through various pieces, but nothing seems quite right. Then she asks if there is anything else, and Madame Forestier shows her a magnificent diamond necklace. It sparkles brilliantly - exactly the kind of jewelry that will make Mathilde look wealthy and elegant. Madame Forestier agrees to lend it without hesitation.

The night of the ball arrives, and Mathilde is a triumph. She is the most beautiful woman there, the center of attention. Every man wants to dance with her. She is elegant, graceful, smiling, and completely happy - intoxicated with success and admiration. She dances until four in the morning, lost in her dream of triumph.

Monsieur Loisel, meanwhile, has been waiting since midnight in a small room with other husbands whose wives are enjoying the ball. He is tired and sleepy but patiently waits for his wife.

Around four in the morning, Mathilde is finally ready to leave. Monsieur Loisel wraps her in their modest everyday coat, which contrasts sharply with the elegant gowns of other women. Embarrassed by this shabby coat, Mathilde wants to leave quickly before others see her in it.

They cannot find a cab immediately and have to walk through the cold Paris streets. Finally, they find one and reach home. Mathilde stands before her mirror for one last look at herself in all her glory before returning to ordinary life. But suddenly, she lets out a scream - the necklace is gone!

They are both horrified. They search everywhere - in the dress, the coat, the pockets - but find nothing. Monsieur Loisel goes back out into the night, retracing their steps, checking with police, visiting cab companies, posting reward advertisements. He searches desperately for days, but the necklace has vanished.

After a week of fruitless searching, they face the terrible reality - the necklace must be replaced. They visit jewelers and finally find an identical necklace. The price is thirty-six thousand francs - an astronomical sum they simply do not have.

Monsieur Loisel has eighteen thousand francs that his father left him. For the rest, they must borrow. He borrows from everyone - friends, acquaintances, moneylenders - anyone who will lend. He signs ruinous promissory notes, agrees to terrible interest rates, and mortgages their entire future.

After gathering the money through desperate means, they buy the replacement necklace. Mathilde takes it to Madame Forestier, who seems slightly annoyed that it took so long to return but does not open the box to check. Mathilde escapes without her deception being discovered.

Now begins ten years of grinding poverty to repay the debts. They dismiss their maid - Mathilde now does all housework herself. They move from their modest apartment to a tiny attic room. Mathilde learns to do rough household work - washing dishes, scrubbing floors, doing laundry, carrying water upstairs, taking out garbage.

Her husband takes on extra work, copying documents late into the night. Every penny is counted and saved. They live on almost nothing, suffering constant privation to pay off their crushing debt.

The beautiful, elegant Mathilde transforms into a strong, rough, common woman. Her hands become red and rough from washing. Her hair is uncombed, her skirts askew. She argues with shopkeepers over every sou. All her dreams of luxury are dead, replaced by the harsh reality of survival.

Throughout this ordeal, Mathilde never tells Madame Forestier the truth. Her pride will not allow it. Sometimes, when alone, she thinks back to that magical evening at the ball - her one perfect night - and wonders how different life would be if she had not lost the necklace.

Ten years pass. Finally, all debts are repaid. Every franc, with accumulated interest, has been paid back. After ten years of backbreaking work and poverty, they are finally free of debt.

Mathilde now looks old, worn, and common - completely transformed by years of hard labor. But sometimes she still thinks about that ball long ago when she was so beautiful and happy.

One Sunday, while walking along the Champs-Élysées, Mathilde sees Madame Forestier walking with a child. Madame Forestier still looks young, beautiful, and unchanged. Mathilde feels a surge of emotion and decides to speak to her.

She approaches: "Hello, Jeanne." Madame Forestier does not recognize her and seems confused. "I'm Mathilde Loisel!" she says. Madame Forestier is shocked at how much Mathilde has changed.

Mathilde explains: "I've had difficult years since I last saw you - great poverty - and all because of you!" When Madame Forestier asks what she means, Mathilde explains about the lost necklace.

Madame Forestier is stunned: "You bought a diamond necklace to replace mine?" Mathilde confirms that they spent ten years paying for it. She smiles with simple, proud joy at having endured so much.

But then comes the devastating revelation. Madame Forestier, deeply moved, takes Mathilde's hands and says: "Oh, my poor Mathilde! But my necklace was fake! It was costume jewelry! It was worth at most five hundred francs!"

The story ends with this crushing irony. Mathilde and her husband destroyed their lives, suffered ten years of poverty, aged prematurely, and gave up all their dreams - all to replace a necklace that was worthless. If Mathilde had been honest from the beginning and told the truth, she would have learned it was fake and her life would have been completely different.

Central Themes

1. Vanity and Pride Lead to Downfall

Mathilde's obsession with appearances and social status directly causes her ruin. Her pride prevents her from being honest, which would have saved her.

2. Appearance versus Reality

The central irony - the necklace looked valuable but was fake, just as Mathilde appeared happy at the ball but was actually miserable in life. Things are not what they seem.

3. The Cost of Dishonesty

If Mathilde had simply told the truth about losing the necklace, the disaster would have been averted. Her dishonesty created unnecessary suffering.

4. Class Consciousness and Materialism

Mathilde's obsession with wealth and status blinds her to the good things in her life - a loving husband and adequate comfort.

5. Irony and Fate

The story's tragic irony shows how one small decision or moment of dishonesty can have devastating lifelong consequences.

Character Sketches

1. Mathilde Loisel

Beautiful but deeply flawed. Her vanity, pride, and obsession with social status blind her to real happiness. She shows strength in enduring poverty but lacks the wisdom to prevent it. Her transformation from vain beauty to hardened worker is both tragic and ironic.

2. Monsieur Loisel

The real hero - patient, loving, and self-sacrificing. He gives up his own pleasures for his wife and works himself to exhaustion to pay the debt without complaint. His love for Mathilde is genuine and unselfish.

3. Madame Forestier

Represents true wealth and genuine generosity. She lends the necklace without hesitation and is genuinely distressed when learning what happened. The revelation that the necklace was fake adds the final ironic twist.

Important Vocabulary (With Meanings)

- **Dowry** – money or property brought by a bride to her husband
- **Privations** – state of lacking basic necessities
- **Usurers** – people who lend money at exorbitantly high interest rates
- **Askew** – not in a straight or level position; crooked
- **Adulation** – excessive admiration or praise
- **Pauper** – a very poor person
- **Elation** – great happiness and exhilaration
- **Vexation** – state of being annoyed or worried
- **Disconsolate** – without consolation; very unhappy
- **Rueful** – expressing sorrow or regret

Exam-Ready Key Points

- Mathilde Loisel is beautiful but unhappy with her modest middle-class life
- She dreams of wealth and luxury constantly despite having a loving husband
- She borrows a diamond necklace from Madame Forestier to wear to a ball
- Mathilde is a great success at the ball but loses the necklace afterward
- Instead of telling the truth, she and her husband buy a replacement for 36,000 francs
- They spend ten years in poverty repaying the debt
- Mathilde is transformed from a beautiful young woman to a hardened, aged worker
- After ten years, she finally reveals the truth to Madame Forestier
- The devastating twist - the original necklace was fake, worth only 500 francs
- The story teaches that vanity, pride, and dishonesty lead to unnecessary suffering