

In truth women do not belong to any special caste or race—grace and charm are their birthright and family-tree. Their tact, instinctive elegance, and supple *esprit* are their sole hierarchy, and make of the daughters of the people rivals to the *grandes dames* of the world.

She suffered endlessly—from the poverty of her surroundings, the barrenness of the walls, the decrepitude of the chairs, the hideousness of their coverings. All this, which another woman of her caste would not even have noticed, tortured and humiliated her. The sight of the little Breton maid who was all things in one in this humble *ménage* aroused in her bitter regrets and impatient desires. Her fancy pictured silent antechambers, whose ceilings glowed with oriental frescoes, lighted by tall candelabra of bronze, with two great footmen in plush and powder lolling before a blazing fire. She dreamed of immense salons, hung by antique silks, of costly and curious cabinets filled with priceless bibelots, of a small but exquisite boudoir whose perfumed warmth and shaded light suggested delightful communion with a few chosen and congenial spirits, with those men of culture and renown whose admiration most women envy and desire.

When seated opposite her husband at dinner, the cloth a by no means spotless one, and heard him exclaim: "Ah! the delicious stew! there is nothing better to be had anywhere!" She thought of the thousand and one things that go to make up a really good dinner, of the glitter of rare silver, the rich tapestries with their figures of ancient heroes and curious birds in the midst of a fairy forest. She saw manifold courses served on marvellous dishes; heard the whispered gallantries while enjoying the pinky delicacy of a trout, or rising to higher delight on the wing of a lark. She possessed no gowns that could merit the title of toilettes, no jewels, nothing.

And all these things she loved, she said. Like Napoleon, "*l'état*"—only in this case, *bien entendu*, she meant that of fashion and the world—"l'état! c'est moi!" She longed supremely for the power to attract, to captivate, to be a little envied, but above all things to be thought extremely fascinating and extremely *chic*. She had a friend of the old convent days who had made a wealthy marriage, but she rarely went to see her; the contrast to her own life was too painful. After seeing her she would weep for hours from chagrin, regret, vexation and despair.

One evening her husband came home with a radiant air, carrying a large square envelope. "*Tiens*," he cried, "here is something for you." She rapidly tore the envelope and drew out a card on which these words were printed: "The Minister of Public Instruction and Madame Georges Bamponneau request the pleasure of Monsieur and Madame Loisel's company, on Monday evening, the 18th of January, at their official residence."

But instead of being enchanted, as her husband had expected, she threw the invitation on the table with a disdainful:

"What am I to do with that?"
"But, *chérie*, I thought you would have been so delighted. You never go to anything, and this is an opportunity, a chance in a hundred! I had the greatest difficulty in obtaining this card. Every one is dying to go; it is a great favour, for few cards are given to the employés. You will see all the swells of the official world there."

With an indignant look at her husband she exclaimed impatiently:

"And pray what am I to wear on *such* an occasion?"

This had not occurred to him; he stammered out:

"Oh, the gown you wear to the theatre. I always thought it so pretty, I . . ."

He became suddenly silent, wonderstruck to see that his wife was actually crying. Two great tears rolled slowly down to the corners of her mouth. He faltered:

"What is it, *petite*, what is it?"

With a violent effort she suppressed all further tears, and wiping her cheeks, said calmly:

"It is nothing. But as I have no gown of course I cannot go; give the card to one of your colleagues whose wife is better equipped for such occasions than I."

He was disconsolate. Finally he said:

"Come, Mathilde, how much would a proper gown cost: something pretty yet simple, that would do for *all* occasions?"

She reflected for several moments, divided between a swift calculation of the actual sum required, and one she hoped would not provoke an immediate refusal from her economical husband.

At last she said hesitatingly: "I cannot say precisely, but I fancy I might manage with four hundred francs."

He changed colour ever so slightly, for he had put aside just this amount for the purchase of a good gun, that he might join a shooting-party of friends in the Plains of Monterre the following summer: Sunday morning sorties that would prove fatal to hundreds of tiny feathered creatures.

Nevertheless, he said: "Very well. You shall have the four hundred francs. Only try to buy the loveliest gown possible."

The day of the ball crept on, but Madame Loisel appeared depressed, restless, anxious. And yet the gown was finished and pretty beyond measure.

One evening her husband said to her: "What is the matter, little one? I have not been able to make you out at all these last few days."

"I will tell you. It is because I have no jewels; not a single stone. In spite of my gown, I shall look poverty-stricken. I would almost rather not go."

He answered simply: "Wear some natural flowers. It is quite the fashion, indeed very *chic* at this season. For ten francs you have two or three magnificent roses."

But she was not convinced.

"No, no! Nothing is so humiliating as looking dowdy in the midst of well-dressed women."

"How stupid we are," suddenly exclaimed her husband; "go to your friend Madame Forestier, and ask her to lend you some jewels. She will not refuse them to such an old friend."

"True, true"—in a tone of delight—"I should never have thought of this."

The following day she went to her friend, and confessed to her distress at having no jewels.

Madame Forestier went to a wardrobe, took from it a large case, opened it, and said to Mathilde: "Make your own choice, dear."

It was a difficult one to make between two beautiful bracelets, a string of pearls, and an exquisitely wrought Venetian cross of mosaic. Madame Loisel tried on each in turn before a mirror, in fond hesitation as to which was the most becoming. At last she said: "You have no other set?"

"But yes; look further. I can scarcely tell what will please you best."

Presently Madame Loisel discovered in a black satin box a superb *rivière* of diamonds, and a sudden wild wish darted through her mind. With trembling hands she took it out and fastened it around her throat over the enhancing contrast of her dark gown, and stood entranced with the brilliant effect.

At last she asked, falteringly, conscious of nothing but the dread of a refusal: "Might I have this, only this, nothing else?"

"Certainly, *chérie*, why not?"

Mathilde flew to her friend, embraced her fervently on both cheeks, then hastened home with her treasure.

The evening of the ball arrived. Madame Loisel was the acknowledged belle, more beautiful than any; *élégante*, graceful, smiling, radiant with pleasure. All the men came, saw and were conquered. All the *attachés* danced with her. The Minister himself remarked her. She danced with spirit, with entire abandon, completely carried by the sense of perfect enjoyment, oblivious of everything but the present moment, enraptured with the effect of her beauty, the glory of her success; in a new exhilarating atmosphere, created by all this homage, this admiration, these thrills of suddenly-awakened emotions; by this triumph, so complete, and so dear to a woman's heart. As to Loisel, he had slept since midnight in a deserted little salon with three other husbands whose wives were also loth to leave so dazzling a scene.

The Loisels did not leave till four in the morning. On quitting the ball-room he threw over her shoulders her somewhat faded and shabby cloak, a modest garment of every-day life that harmonized ill with the splendour of her ball-dress. Conscious of this incongruity, she hurried away as quickly as possible to avoid the surprised glances and possibly ill-natured remarks of more richly bemantled ladies. Loisel tried to detain her.

"One moment, and I will call a cab for you. You will be chilled standing in this air."

But deaf to his words she hastily descended the stairway. Arrived in the street they could not find a cab, and were obliged to walk some little distance, calling in vain to two or three in the distance rapidly disappearing vehicles. Greatly vexed and grumbling they turned towards the Seine. At last they found on the quay one of those dilapidated Parisian coupés that one only sees crawling about at night as if ashamed to parade their shabbiness in broad daylight.

It took them to their door in the Rue des Martyrs, and they somewhat sadly mounted the steps to their modest apartment. Much was over for her—he only remembered that he must be at his work at the usual hour that day. Standing before her mirror she slowly unfastened the faded cloak for one more look at her brilliant reflection. Suddenly a cry of horror broke from her. The *rivière* of diamonds was gone!

Her husband, already half undressed, called out, "What is it?"

"I—I—have lost Madame Forestier's diamonds!"

"Oh! *Mon Dieu*! it is impossible!"

And he searched in the folds of her dress, her cloak, in the pockets—everywhere; but in vain.

"Are you sure you had them on when you left the ball-room?"

"Yes, yes; I felt them when we were in the vestibule of the Ministry."

"You could not have lost them in the street, we should have heard them fall. The necklace must be in the cab."

"Oh, yes. It is more than likely. Did you notice the number?"

"No; and you?"

"Neither did I."

They gazed at each other in bewilderment. At last Loisel commenced rapidly to redress. "I will go at once and retrace step by step the way we came; it must be found." He hurried out. Still in her evening gown, faint with dread, nerveless and panic-stricken, she awaited his return. About seven he returned. He had found nothing. Later he went to the police-station, to the various printers' offices, to offer a reward for its recovery; to the private cab companies, wherever in fact a ray of hope seemed to guide him. She waited all day in a state of stupefaction at this terrible disaster. In the evening Loisel came home, pale, bent with fatigue; his search had been fruitless.

"There is nothing to be done but to write to your friend and say you have taken the *rivière* to a jeweller to have the clasp, which was somewhat loose, mended. That will give us time to take counsel."

And she wrote as he dictated.

At the end of a week, hearing nothing, they lost all hope. And Loisel, five years older, decided: "We must consider how we can replace this