

WILLIAM THOMAS

The Necklace

“I want to give you the plot for a story.”

Up to this moment I had thought of Arthur Stanley as one of my good British friends. He sipped his cocktail with a complacency that was almost an added insult. I suppose I winced.

“Don’t you want it?”

“You know very well, Arthur, that I’ve more plots in my head than I can ever use. For every one I get out onto paper, two more come in. Besides, I never can make a story sprout from somebody else’s germ. No matter how good it may sound, I’ve no enthusiasm for an idea that isn’t mine.”

“This is a true story.”

“As if that’s anything to recommend it. A writer knows that fiction is truer than truth because the truth is always cluttered up with non-essentials. The writer has to hew them away before he can deal with what’s important. When he invents, he invents only what is useful to him.”

“This is a story about a necklace.”

“Arthur! How have I offended you to make you treat me like this? Once upon a time, back in the happy days of the nineteenth century, there was a French author whose name was Guy de Maupassant. He wrote a story that he called ‘The Necklace’. It has fascinated many people. Every schoolboy reads it. At least in my day all American schoolboys read it. And how you could get to your time of life—”

“Yes, Jud, I knew I’d have to bear up under this. Now that you’ve got the lecture out of your system, maybe you can bring yourself to listen. Among the people who’ve been fascinated by Maupassant’s rather slight story was Somerset Maugham. Maugham perceived that, even though Maupassant was able to impart a great deal of tragic irony to the situation he contrived, a quite different and possibly more convincing story about a necklace might be written on another Maupassant theme, that of ‘The Jewels’.”

“That’s the one about a clerk whose wife is fond of gaudy jewelry—only it turns out after she dies that the stuff is real and worth a fortune.”

“Her husband is made wealthy from the proceeds.”

“But Maugham didn’t copy Maupassant.”

“Not really. Maugham’s ‘Mr. Know-All’ deals with one point in time in a single scene. This story, you may recall, which takes place on shipboard, is constructed around a wager between a jewel merchant and a consular attaché as to whether the pearls worn by the latter’s wife are genuine. The merchant is about to reveal the truth when he sees the look of terror in the woman’s eyes, pronounces them false, and pays off the bet. To Maugham, this was a more plausible function of a necklace in a story than Maupassant’s concern with the paste diamonds that Madame Loisel lost returning from the Minister of Education’s reception. Or the mental agitation of a poor man made rich by his wife’s infidelity.”

"I remember the Maugham story," I said. "But any fictional use of a necklace makes one think first of Maupassant's."

"As you say, that has fascinated many people. And Maugham, who was adept at getting the utmost out of a good idea, didn't stop thinking about a necklace after 'Mr. Know-All'. He wrote another story, which he called 'A String of Beads'. Do you remember that one?"

"I think I've read it. But recall it to me."

"In a way—perhaps not a subtle way, but that would be pretty hard to achieve—it's a spoof on all stories about a necklace, including the one he'd written. It begins in Maugham's typical and lazy-seeming manner with himself as narrator being offered a plot for a story."

"Only Maugham could get away with that."

"A true story that takes place at a dinner party."

"What would Maugham have done without the institution of the dinner-party?"

"He'd have had to be a different kind of writer. In 'A String of Beads' he is sitting by a woman whom he calls Laura, and she is telling him about a dinner where the hostess, Mrs. Livingstone, has brought in their governess to fill the place of an absentee. One of the guests, Count Borselli, is a jewel expert, and he remarks that the pearl necklace the governess is wearing is extremely valuable—worth fifty thousand pounds. The governess, Miss Robinson, denies that, but before dinner is over two men from a jeweler's establishment come to reclaim the necklace, which had been brought in for restringing and then, by a careless mistake, given over to Miss Robinson in place of one she'd paid fifteen shillings for. Hers was having its clasp repaired. As a sort of reward—or solace—they give her a check for three hundred pounds.

"Now instead of doing something sensible with the money, Miss Robinson goes off to France for a fling, captures a wealthy protector, and abandons her career as a governess for a highly successful one as a mistress. For Maugham, it becomes *her* story, and he conceives her course of action as the logical working-out of circumstances. Whereas Laura, who observed it to happen, is dissatisfied, and would have preferred Miss Robinson to marry properly, buy a little house, and devote herself to an invalid husband."

"The romanticist's view is nearly always sentimental. If that's the plot you're offering me, I don't want it. I'd rather go to school to Maugham."

"Maybe you would. And I grant you could do worse. But in this instance he didn't make the most of his material. For some reason, he didn't see it steadily or whole. It isn't Miss Robinson's story at all."

"Whose is it?"

"Mrs. Livingstone's. What actually happened is this: the valuable necklace was Mrs. Livingstone's, and it was she who'd sent it to the jeweler for restringing solely in order that she wouldn't have to wear it at the dinner. Her husband, who knew she had it as a birthday gift from a man friend of long standing, and didn't disapprove, thought it a bauble worth eighteen or twenty pounds. He liked to see her wearing it, and would have been annoyed with her

if she'd appeared without it. Mrs. Livingstone, who was sure the Count would instantly recognize its value, also feared that he might remark about it even if she herself were wearing it. In any case, she didn't want him or anyone else present to know its worth."

"But if Mrs. Livingstone's husband liked her to wear it, he must have noticed it on the governess."

"He was at the other end of the table, and he wouldn't have given much attention to the governess because of her station. So he mightn't have observed it but for the Count's remark and the men from the jeweler's. Of course he went to the jeweler and verified the fact that his wife's necklace was worth fifty thousand pounds. That made it a different sort of gift, and the giver a different sort of man standing in an altogether different relationship to his wife."

"You speak, Arthur, as if you were reciting facts instead of fiction."

"I told you it's a true story. I'm a barrister, and senior partner in the firm of Stanley and Osborne. I have it from an unimpeachable source."

"Mr. Livingstone, I presume?"

"That isn't his name, to be sure. But you're quite right. And, since they've been exposed, Mrs. Livingstone's old lover has left her and taken up with Miss Robinson. All Mrs. Livingston has left out of the ruin of her life is her valuable string of pearls."

