A String of Beads

W. Somerset Maugham

“WHAT A BIT OF LUCK that I’m placed next to you,” said Laura, as we sat down to dinner.

”For me,” I replied politely.

“That remains to be seen. I particularly wanted to have the chance of talking to you. I’ve got a story to tell you.”

At this my heart sank a little.

“I’d sooner you talked about yourself,” I answered. “Or even about me.”

“Oh, but I must tell you the story. I think you’ll be able to use it."

“If you must, you must. But let’s look at the menu first.”

“Don’t you want me to?” she said, somewhat aggrieved. “I thought you’d be pleased."

“I am. You might have written a play and wanted to read me that.”

“It happened to some friends of mine. It’s perfectly true.”

“That’s no recommendation. A true story is never quite so true as an invented one.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing very much,” I admitted. “But I thought it sounded well.”

“I wish you’d let me get on with it."

“I’m all attention. I’m not going to eat the soup. It’s fattening.”

She gave me a pinched look and then glanced at the menu. She uttered a little sigh.

“Oh, well, if you’re going to deny yourself I suppose I must too. Heaven knows, I can’t afford to take liberties with my figure.”

“And yet is there any soup more heavenly than the sort of soup in which you put a great dollop of cream?”

“Bortsch,” she sighed. “It’s the only soup I really like.”

“Never mind. Tell me your story and we’ll forget about food till the fish comes.”

“Well, I was actually there when it happened. I was dining with the Livingstones. Do you know the Livingstones?”

“No, I don’t think I do.”

“Well, you can ask them and they’ll confirm every word I say. They’d asked their governess to come in to dinner because some woman had thrown them over at the last moment—you know how inconsiderate people are—and they would have been thirteen at table. Their governess was a Miss Robinson, quite a nice girl, young, you know, twenty or twenty-one, and rather pretty. Personally I would never engage a governess who was young and pretty. One never knows.”

“But one hopes for the best.”

Laura paid no attention to my remark.

“The chances are that she’ll be thinking of young men instead of attending to her duties and then, just when she’s got used to your ways, she’ll want to go and get married. But Miss Robinson had excellent references, and I must allow that she was a very nice, respectable person. I believe in point of fact she was a clergyman’s daughter.

“There was a man at dinner whom I don’t suppose you’ve ever heard of, but who’s quite a celebrity in his way. He’s a Count Borselli and he knows more about precious stones than anyone in the world. He was sitting next to Mary Lyngate, who rather fancies herself on her pearls, and in the course of conversation she asked him what he thought of the string she was wearing, he said it was very pretty. She was rather piqued at this and told him it was valued at eight thousand pounds. “ ‘Yes, it’s worth that,’ he said.

“Miss Robinson was sitting opposite to him. She was looking rather nice that evening. Of course I recognized her dress, it was one of Sophie’s old ones; but if you hadn’t known Miss Robinson was

the governess you would never have suspected it.

“ ‘That’s a very beautiful necklace that young lady has on,’ said Borselli.

“ ‘Oh, but that’s Mrs Livingstone’s governess,’ said Mary Lyngate.

“ ‘I can’t help that,’ he said. ‘She’s wearing one of the finest strings of pearls for its size that I’ve ever seen in my life. It must be worth fifty thousand pounds.’

“ ‘Nonsense.’

“ ‘I give you my word it is.’

“Mary Lyngate leant over. She has rather a shrill voice.

“ ‘Miss Robinson, do you know what Count Borselli says?’ she exclaimed. ‘He says that string of pearls you’re wearing is worth fifty thousand pounds.’

“Just at that moment there was a sort of pause in the conversation so that everybody heard. We all turned and looked at Miss Robinson. She flushed a little and laughed.

“ ‘Well, I made a very good bargain,’ she said, ‘because I paid fifteen shillings for it.’

“ ‘You certainly did.’

“We all laughed. It was of course absurd. We’ve all heard of wives palming off on their husbands as false a string of pearls that was real and expensive. That story is as old as the hills.”

“Thank you,” I said, thinking of a little narrative of my own.

“But it was too ridiculous to suppose that a governess would remain a governess if she owned a string of pearls worth fifty thousand pounds. It was obvious that the Count had made a bloomer. Then an extraordinary thing happened. The long arm of coincidence came in.”

“It shouldn’t,” I retorted. “It’s had too much exercise. Haven’t you seen that charming book called A Dictionary of English Usage?”

“I wish you wouldn’t interrupt just when I’m really getting to the exciting point.”

But I had to do so again, for just then a young grilled salmon was insinuated round my left elbow.

“Mrs. Livingstone is giving us a heavenly dinner,” I said.

“Is salmon fattening?” asked Laura.

“Very,” I answered as I took a large helping. “Bunk,” she said.

“Go on,” I begged her. “The long arm of coincidence was about to make a gesture.”

“Well, at that very moment the butler bent over Miss Robinson and whispered something in her ear. I thought she turned a trifle pale. It’s such a mistake not to wear rouge; you never know what tricks nature will play on you. She certainly looked startled. She leant forwards.

“ ‘Mrs Livingstone, Dawson says there are two men in the hall who want to speak to me at once.’

“ ‘Well, you’d better go,’ said Sophie Livingstone.

“Miss Robinson got up and left the room. Of course the same thought flashed through all our minds, but I said it first.

“ ‘I hope they haven’t come to arrest her,’ I said to Sophie. ‘It would be too dreadful for you, my dear.’

“ ‘Are you sure it was a real necklace, Borselli ?’ she asked.

“ ‘Oh, quite.’

“ ‘She could hardly have had the nerve to wear it tonight if it were stolen,’ I said.

“Sophie Livingstone turned as pale as death under her make-up and I saw she was wondering if everything was all right in her jewel case. I only had on a little chain of diamonds, but instinctively I put my hand up to my neck to feel if it was still there.

“ ‘Don’t talk nonsense,’ said Mr Livingstone. ‘How on earth would Miss Robinson have had the chance of sneaking a valuable string of pearls?’

“ ‘She may be a receiver,’ I said.

“ ‘Oh, but she had such wonderful references,’ said Sophie.

“ ‘They always do,’ I said.”

I was positively forced to interrupt Laura once more.

“You don’t seem to have been determined to take a very bright view of the case,” I remarked.

“Of course I knew nothing against Miss Robinson and I had every reason to think her a very nice girl, but it would have been rather thrilling to find out that she was a notorious thief and a well-known member of a gang of international crooks.”

“Just like a film. I’m dreadfully afraid that it’s only in films that exciting things like that happen.” “Well, we waited in breathless suspense. There was not a sound. I expected to hear a scuffle in the hall or at least a smothered shriek. I thought the silence very ominous. Then the door opened and Miss Robinson walked in. I noticed at once that the necklace was gone. I could see that she was pale and excited. She came back to the table, sat down and with a smile threw on it——”

“On what?”

“On the table, you fool. A string of pearls.”

“ ‘There’s my necklace,’ she said.

“Count Borselli leant forwards.

“ ‘Oh, but those are false,’ he said.

“ ‘I told you they were,’ she laughed.

“ ‘That’s not the same string you had on a few moments ago,’ he said.

“She shook her head and smiled mysteriously. We were all intrigued. I don’t know that Sophie Livingstone was so very much pleased at her governess making herself the centre of interest like that and I thought there was a suspicion of tartness in her manner when she suggested that Miss Robinson had better explain. Well, Miss Robinson said that when she went into the hall she found two men who said they’d come from Jarrot’s Stores. She’d bought her string there, as she said, for fifteen shillings, and she’d taken it back because the clasp was loose and had only fetched it that afternoon. The men said they had given her the wrong string. Someone had left a string of real pearls to be restrung and the assistant had made a mistake. Of course I can’t understand how anyone could be so stupid as to take a really valuable string to Jarrot’s, they aren’t used to dealing with that sort of thing, and they wouldn’t know real pearls from false; but you know what fools some women are. Anyhow it was the string Miss Robinson was wearing and it was valued at fifty thousand pounds. She naturally gave it back to them—she couldn’t do anything else, I suppose, though it must have been a wrench—and they returned her own string to her; then they said that although of course they were under no obligation— you know the silly, pompous way men talk when they’re trying to be businesslike—they were instructed, as a solatium or whatever you call it, to offer her a cheque for three hundred pounds. Miss Robinson actually showed it to us. She was as pleased as Punch.”

“Well, it was a piece of luck, wasn’t it?”

“You’d have thought so. As it turned out it was the ruin of her.”

“Oh, how was that?"

“Well, when the time came for her to go on her holiday she told Sophie Livingstone that she’d made up her mind to go to Deauville for a month and blue the whole three hundred pounds. Of course Sophie tried to dissuade her, and begged her to put the money in the savings bank, but she wouldn’t hear of it. She said slic’d never had such a chance before and would never have it again and she meant for at least four weeks to live like a duchess. Sophie couldn’t really do anything and so she gave way. She sold Miss Robinson a lot of clothes that she didn’t want; she’d been wearing them all through the season and was sick to death of them; she says she gave them to her, but I don’t suppose she quite did that—I dare say she sold them very cheap—

and Miss Robinson started off, entirely alone, for

Deauville. What do you think happened then?"

“I haven’t a notion,” I replied. “I hope she had the time of her life.”

“Well, a week before she was due to come back she wrote to Sophie and said that she’d changed her plans and had entered another profession and hoped Mrs Livingstone would forgive her if she didn’t return. Of course poor Sophie was furious. What had actually happened was that Miss Robinson had picked up a rich Argentine in Deauville and had gone off to Paris with him. She’s been in Paris ever since. I’ve seen her myself at Florence’s, with bracelets right up to her elbow and ropes of pearls round her neck. Of course I cut her dead. They say she has a house in the Bois de Boulogne and I know she has a Rolls. She threw over the Argentine in a few months and then got hold of a Greek; I don’t know who she’s with now, but the long and short of it is that she’s far and away the smartest cocotte in Paris.”

“When you say she was ruined you use the word in a purely technical sense, I conclude,” said I.

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” said Laura. “But don’t you think you could make a story out of it?"

“Unfortunately I’ve already written a story about a pearl necklace. One can’t go on writing stories about pearl necklaces.”

“I’ve got half a mind to write it myself. Only of course I should change the end.”

“Oh, how would you end it?”

“Well, I should have had her engaged to a bank clerk who had been badly knocked about in the war, with only one leg, say, or half his face shot away: and they’d be dreadfully poor and there would be no prospect of their marriage for years, and he would be putting all his savings into buying a little house in the suburbs and they’d have arranged to marry when he had saved the last instalment. And then she takes him the three hundred pounds and they can hardly believe it, they’re so happy, and he cries on her shoulder. He just cries like a child. And they get the little house in the suburbs and they marry, and they have his old mother to live with them, and he goes to the bank every day, and if she’s careful not to have babies she can still go out as a daily governess, and lie’s often ill—with his wound, you know —and she nurses him, and it’s all very pathetic and sweet and lovely.”

“It sounds rather dull to me,” I ventured.

“Yes, but moral,” said Laura.