

W. Somerset Maugham, A STRING OF BEADS

Miss Robinson had always been poor. When her father died, she had no money. She got a job at the house of Mrs Livingstone – a rich woman with two young daughters. Miss Robinson’s job was teaching Mrs Livingstone’s daughters at home. She was their governess.

Miss Robinson lived in the house of Mrs Livingstone like a servant. But she was intelligent and well-educated. And sometimes she was asked to dinner when the Livingstones had visitors.

One evening, Mrs Livingstone invited some friends to dinner. She asked fourteen people. At the last moment, one of the guests was unable to come. Mrs Livingstone now had thirteen guests. But thirteen is an unlucky number and so she invited Miss Robinson.

The people at the dinner were all rich and important. Miss Robinson sat quietly and did not say anything. She was wearing an old dress of Mrs Livingstone’s and she looked pretty. She was also wearing a string of pearls.

One of the guests at the dinner was Count Borselli – a rich and famous man. He knew everything about pearls and diamonds and other precious stones.

There was a young lady at dinner called Miss Lyngate. She, also, was wearing a string of pearls. She was very proud of her pearls and she asked Count Borselli to look at them.

‘They’re quite nice pearls,’ said the Count.

This did not please Miss Lyngate. ‘Quite nice’ was not good enough for her. She had wanted the Count to say ‘very nice’ – ‘very, very nice’.

‘This string of pearls cost eight thousand pounds,’ said Miss Lyngate.

‘Yes, that’s the correct price,’ said Count Borselli. He spoke in an ordinary voice. But Miss Lyngate understood. The count did not think that eight thousand pounds was a lot of money.

At that moment, Count Borselli pointed to Miss Robinson.

‘That is a very nice string of pearls,’ he said.

‘Miss Robinson’s pearls?’ said Miss Lyngate. ‘But she is Mrs Livingstone’s governess!’

Miss Lyngate was now angry. Governesses were not rich people. A governess did not wear a valuable string of pearls.

‘We’re not talking about governesses,’ replied the Count. ‘We’re talking about pearls. That string of pearls is worth more than fifty thousand pounds.’

Miss Lyngate was surprised and angry. She did not believe Count Borselli. He was mistaken. Governesses did *not* wear strings of pearls worth more than fifty thousand pounds.

‘Miss Robinson,’ she said in a loud voice. ‘Do you know that you are wearing a very valuable string of pearls?’

Everyone stopped talking. They all listened to Miss Robinson’s reply.

‘I paid fifteen shillings for these beads,’ said Miss Robinson quietly.

Miss Lyngate laughed.

‘I knew that Count Borselli was wrong,’ she said. ‘He says that your pearls are worth fifty thousand pounds.’

Now everyone in the room was silent. Fifty thousand pounds! A governess with a string of pearls worth fifty thousand pounds! That was not possible. A woman with fifty thousand pounds was a very rich woman.

W. Somerset Maugham, A STRING OF BEADS



Count Borselli pointed to Miss Robinson. 'That is a very nice string of pearls,' he said.

'But I bought these beads for fifteen shillings,' said Miss Robinson again. 'Count Borselli made a mistake.'

'I do not make mistakes,' said the Count quietly. 'I know the value of pearls.'

At that moment something unusual happened. A servant came up to the table and spoke quietly to Miss Robinson. The governess looked surprised and her face went white.

'Excuse me, Mrs Livingstone,' she said. 'I must leave the table. Two men are waiting in the hall. They want to speak to me.'

Miss Robinson got up and left the table. When she was out of the room, everyone began to talk excitedly.

'She's a thief,' said someone. 'The two men are policemen. Miss Robinson has stolen the pearls. She will go to prison.'

'A thief in my house,' cried Mrs Livingstone. 'How terrible!' What shall I do? What has she been teaching my daughters?'

Everyone started to talk at the same time. Suddenly there was silence. Miss Robinson had come back into the room. She looked much happier. She did not look like a thief.

Miss Robinson was not wearing her pearls. Instead, she had a string of pearls in her hand. She sat down at the table and passed the string of pearls over to Count Borselli.

'How much are these pearls worth?' she asked.

Count Borselli looked at the pearls for a few moments.

'Fifteen shillings,' he said.

'That's correct,' replied Miss Robinson. 'My beads were broken and I took them to a shop a few days ago. When I went to get them,

W. Somerset Maugham, A STRING OF BEADS



'She's a thief,' said someone. 'The two men are policemen. Miss Robinson has stolen the pearls.'

there was a mistake. The shop gave me the wrong string of pearls. That other string of pearls was worth fifty thousand pounds.'

Everyone laughed. It had all been a mistake.

'The men from the shop were very pleased to get the pearls back,' said Miss Robinson. 'They've given me a present of three hundred pounds.'

Again, everyone talked at the same time. Three hundred pounds was a lot of money for a governess.

Mrs Livingstone stopped everyone talking.

'What are you going to do with the tree hundred pounds?' she asked loudly.

But she did not wait for a reply.

'You must put the money in a bank,' she said. 'You must keep it safely. You may need it one day.'

'I'm not going to put the money in a bank,' replied Miss Robinson proudly. 'All my life I've never had a holiday. Now I'm going to the South of France.'

Mrs Livingstone looked at her angrily. A governess was a servant. Servants did not go on holiday to the South of France. And, also, governesses accepted the advice of their masters and mistresses.

'You can leave at the end of the month,' said Mrs Livingstone in an angry voice. 'But you need not to come back again. There will be no job for you here.'

'I don't want to come back here,' replied Miss Robinson. And she got up quietly and left the room.

W. Somerset Maugham, A STRING OF BEADS

At the end of the month, Miss Robinson went on a holiday to the South of France. Mrs Livingstone was not pleased. She hoped to hear bad news about Miss Robinson.

Six months later, Mrs Livingstone gave another dinner. Miss Lyngate, Count Borselli and other friends were there. They all remembered Miss Robinson. Someone started to talk about her.

‘Miss Robinson will never come back here again,’ said Mrs Livingstone in a loud voice.

‘Miss Robinson will not want to come back,’ said Count Borselli. ‘Haven’t you heard the news?’

‘What news?’ someone asked excitedly.

‘I’ve just come from the South of France,’ replied the Count. ‘Everyone there is talking about Miss Robinson. But that’s not her name now. She’s a countess. She met a count in her hotel and married him soon afterwards. The count is a millionaire and she now lives with him in Paris. She’ll never work as a governess again.’

‘And all because of a mistake,’ said Miss Lyngate. ‘A cheap string of beads has made her a countess and a millionaire.’