

The Piece of String

(Guy de Maupassant)

At the end of market day, the rich people with vehicles of all kinds, carts, gigs, wagons, dumpcarts gathered at a great big hall for a great meal.

There were chickens, pigeons and legs of mutton in the roast and an appetizing odour of roast, beef. Leaf and gravy dripping over the browned skin, which increased the appetite and made everybody's mouth water. Everyone told his affairs, his purchases and sales. The diners discussed the crops and the weather which was favourable for the green things but not for wheat. Suddenly, at the sound of drumbeat in the court everybody rose from the seats except a few ones who still had the food in their hands. After the drumbeat had ceased, the drummer called out to the people who were now attentive and impatiently waiting for him to call out the public announcement. "It is hereby made known to the inhabitants of this place and in general to all persons in the market that a black leather pocketbook containing five hundred shillings and some business papers was lost on the road between 9.00 and 10.00 in the morning. The finder is requested to return the same to the mayor's office or to Mr. James, the caretaker of this public hall. There will be a reward of 20 shillings".

After the meal had concluded the Chief of the police appeared on the scene. He inquired, "Is Mr. Hubert here?" Mr. Hubert seated at another end of the table replied, "Here I am." The police officer went up to him and said, "Mr. Hubert, will you please accompany me to the mayor's office, the mayor would like to talk to you." Mr. Hubert surprised and disturbed, followed the police officer. The mayor, a stout serious man, was waiting for Hubert. "Mr. Hubert," he said, "you were seen this morning to pick up the pocketbook lost by Mr. James." Mr. Hubert, the simple countryman looked at the mayor astounded and already terrified by the suspicion resting on him. "Why, Me? Me? Me picked up the pocketbook?" "Yes, you yourself." "By my word of honour I never heard of it." "But you were seen."

"I was seen with the pocketbook? Who saw me?" "Mr. Manana, the harness man saw you pick up the pocketbook."

Mr. Hubert, the old man, remembered, understood and flushed with anger.

"O, him! Yes! He saw me pick up this string here." And as he said so, he drew out the little piece of string from his pocket.

But the mayor shook his head and said. "You will not make me believe that Mr. Manana, who is a man of worthy credence, mistook the cord for a pocketbook."

Mr. Hubert, the peasant furiously lifted his hand, spat at one side to attest his honour, and said in the most exasperating tone, "It is, nevertheless, truth of the good God, the sacred truth. I repeat it on my soul and my salvation."

"After picking up the object, you stood there, looking a long while in the mud to see if any money had fallen out."

The good soul, Mr. Hubert, choked with indignation and fear.

“How any one can tell such lies to take away an honest man's reputation. How can any one

There was no use of Mr. Hubert's protesting, for nobody believed him. Mr. Manana repeatedly maintained that Hubert had picked up the pocketbook. For an hour both men abused each other. Then at his own request, Mr. Hubert was searched. Nothing was found on him.

Finally the mayor discharged Hubert with warning that he would consult the public prosecutor and ask for further orders.

As he left the mayor's office, people surrounded and questioned him with serious curiosity. Nobody believed his story of the string. Instead people laughed at him.

Mr. Hubert went along stopping his friends giving them his statement and presentation, turning his pocket inside out to prove that he had nothing. All they said was, “you old rascal! Get out of here!”.

Mr. Hubert went to the village telling every man he knew about his adventure, but he only met with incredulity. It all made him ill. The next day in the afternoon a man named George returned the pocketbook and its contents to Mr. James the owner of the pocketbook.

George claimed to have found the pocketbook on the road to the village market, but not knowing how to read he had given it to his employer.

The news spread like fire in the neighbourhood. Mr. Hubert was also informed. He was in triumph.

“What grieved me as much was not the thing itself – as the lying. There is nothing so shameful as to be called a liar.”

Whatever reasons he gave, people were not willing to believe him. “Those are lying excuses.” They said behind his back.

Hubert felt this shame and disgrace to his self-esteem and character. He consumed his heart over this and wasted away before the very eyes of the people.

People started to tell the story of the string to amuse themselves and told it in a manner of soldier who had been on a campaign and told about his battles. Hubert's mind touched to the depth, began to weaken day by day.

Towards the end of the month he took to his bed. He died in the first week of the following month.

In the delirium of his death struggles he kept claiming his innocence, reiterating:

“A piece of string, a piece of string! By my word of honour I did not lie.”

And he died.

It is said that a great flood in its great wrath carried away the people and all their belongings.

The grave of Hubert withstood the havoc of the flood.

It was engraved on his tomb stone, years after his death, "Here lies a man who told nothing but truth. Here lies the man who would not prove his innocence, but the flood proved it-!"

Theme

One of the author's favourite ways of telling a story is to tell it as though he had personally been involved in it. The teller of the story has no part in the events, but telling it in this way helps make it real. "The Piece of String" depicts the hard facts of life. It is written in a simple way, understandable for the common reader. It is a story of the rural life where cow and calf can be seen.

The main character in the story, Hubert was very economical and he was of the view that every useful thing ought to be picked up. He took the bit of thin cord, which led him to trouble and no one believed him that he had picked up the string. He died in agony.

The main theme of the story is that protecting your innocence makes most people, believe you are guilty.

Reading Notes

appetizing	to make feel hungry
stout	very healthy
astounded	shocked
exasperating	irritating
indignation	annoyance
public prosecutor	legal official of the state
curiosity	eagerness
rascal	a knave
havoc	destruction

- ix. What did Hubert feel?
- a grace of personality
 - shame and disgrace to his self-esteem and character
 - truthful
 - trustworthy
- x. What were the last words Hubert uttered before his death?
- "A piece of string! a piece of string!"
 - By my word of honour I did not lie.
 - I picked up a pocketbook.
 - I handed over the pocketbook to its owner.

2. Mark the sentences true or false.

- Everybody's mouth was watered on the sight of wealth.
- The finder of the pocketbook will be rewarded.
- He drew out the little pocketbook from his pocket.
- Mr. Hubert was pleased to hear the allegation.
- The people greeted Hubert when he came out of the office of the Mayor.
- George found the pocketbook and gave it to Hubert.
- The people believed the reason Hubert gave to prove his innocence.
- The people started to tell the story of the string to amuse themselves.
- A great flood carried away the people.
- Nothing but the flood proved Hubert's innocence.

3. Answer the following questions.

- Why did Manana accuse Hubert of picking the lost pocketbook?
- What did the people think of Hubert when they heard the return of the pocketbook by some other person?
- Why did George give the pocketbook to his employer?
- What made Hubert shameful?
- Why did the people make fun of his innocence?
- Why did he keep claiming his innocence before his death?

4. Answer the following questions in 100 - 150 words.

- Write down a note on the character of Hubert.
- Write ten lines on the mentality of the people who did not believe Hubert.
- Why did the Mayor not believe the innocence of Hubert?
- Was it necessary for Hubert to continue pleading his innocence?
- What suggestions can you give to Hubert to save him from such a

humiliating situation?

5. Fill in the correct preposition (on, to, of, at, from).

- i. He was walking _____ the public square.
- ii. Then he pretended to be looking _____ something _____ the ground.
- iii. They had decided _____ purchase.
- iv. The finder is requested _____ return the same.
- v. George claimed _____ have found the pocketbook.

6. Punctuate the following lines.

i was seen with the pocketbook who saw me mr manana the harness man saw you pick up the pocketbook

7. Use the following words in your sentences.

purchase, attentive, surprised, astounded, shook

8. Read the passage and answer the questions given at the end.

Suddenly, at the sound of drumbeat in the court everybody rose from the seats except a few ones who still had the food in their hands. After the drumbeat had ceased, the drummer called out to the people who were now attentive and impatiently waiting for him to call out the public announcement. "It is hereby made known to the inhabitants of this place and in general to all persons in the market that a black leather pocketbook containing five hundred shilling and some business papers was lost on the road between 9.00 and 10.00 in the morning. The finder is requested to return the same to the mayor's office or to Mr. James, the caretaker of this public hall. There will be a reward of 20 shillings."

- i. Did all the people rise on hearing the sound of drumbeat?
- ii. What was the announcement made by the drummer?
- iii. Who was the owner of the lost pocketbook?
- iv. Where was the pocketbook lost?