The Piece of String

Guy de Maupassant
translated by Roger Colet

On all the roads around Goderville the peasants and their wives were making their way toward the little town, for it was market day. The men were plodding along, their bodies leaning forward with every movement of their long bandy legs—legs deformed by hard work, by the pressure of the plow which also raises the left shoulder and twists the spine, by the spreading of the knees required to obtain a firm stance for reaping, and by all the slow, laborious tasks of country life. Their blue starched smocks, shining as if they were varnished, and decorated with a little pattern in white embroidery on the collar and cuffs, bellied out around their bony frames like balloons ready to fly away, with a head, two arms and two feet sticking out of each one.
Some were leading a cow or a calf by a rope, while their wives hurried the animal on by whipping its haunches with a leafy branch. The women carried large baskets on their arms from which protruded the heads of chickens or ducks. And they walked with a shorter, brisker step than their husbands, their gaunt, erect figures wrapped in skimpy little shawls pinned across their flat chests and their heads wrapped in tight-fitting white coifs topped with bonnets.

Then a cart went by, drawn at a trot by a small horse, with two men sitting side by side bumping up and down and a woman at the back holding on to the sides to lessen the jolts.

The square in Goderville was crowded with a confused mass of animals and human beings. The horns of the bullocks, the tall beaver hats of the well-to-do peasants, and the coifs of the peasant women stood out above the throng. And the high-pitched, shrill, yapping voices made a wild, continuous din, dominated now and then by a great deep-throated roar of laughter from a jovial countryman or the long lowing of a cow tied to the wall of a house.

Everywhere was the smell of cowsheds and milk and manure, of hay and sweat, that sharp, unpleasant odor of men and animals which is peculiar to people who work on the land.

Maître Hauchecorne of Bréauté had just arrived in Goderville and was making his way toward the market square when he caught sight of a small piece of string on the ground. Maître Hauchecorne, a thrifty man like all true Normans, reflected that anything which might come in useful was worth picking up, so he bent down—though with some difficulty, for he suffered from rheumatism. He picked up the piece of thin cord and was about to roll it up carefully when he noticed Maître Malandain, the saddler, standing at his door watching him. They had had a quarrel some time before over a halter and they had remained on bad terms ever since, both of them being the sort to nurse a grudge. Maître Hauchecorne felt a little shamefaced at being seen by his enemy like this, picking a bit of string up out of the muck. He hurriedly concealed his find, first under his smock, then in his trouser pocket; then he pretended to go on looking for something on the ground which he couldn’t find, before continuing on his way to the square, leaning forward, bent double by his rheumatism.

He was promptly lost in the noisy slow-moving crowd, in which everyone was engaged in endless and excited bargaining. The peasants were prodding the cows, walking away and coming back in an agony of indecision, always afraid of being taken in and never daring to make up their minds, watching the vendor’s eyes, and perpetually trying to spot the man’s trick and the animal’s defect.

After putting their big baskets down at their feet, the women had taken out their fowls, which now lay on the ground, tied by their legs, their eyes terrified and their combs scarlet. They listened to the offers they were made and either stuck to their price, hard-faced and impassive, or else, suddenly deciding to accept the lower figure offered, shouted after the customer who was slowly walking away: “All right, Maître Anthime, it’s yours.”

Then, little by little, the crowd in the square thinned out, and as the Angelus rang for noon, those who lived too far away to go home disappeared into the various inns.

At Jourdain’s the main room was crowded with people eating, while the vast courtyard was full of vehicles of all sorts—carts, gigs, wagons, tilbury, and indescribable shandrydans, yellow with dung, broken down and patched

1. Maître (mɛʁtʁ): French word meaning something like “mister” (literally, “master”).
2. Hauchecorne (ɔʃkɔʁn) . . . Bréauté (brəˈoʊtə),
3. Malandain (maˈlɛndən).
4. Anthime (ɑ̃tɛm). 
5. Angelus (ɑ̃ʒɔlɔ): church bell that rings three times a day, calling people to say a prayer beginning “The angel of the Lord . . .”
6. Jourdain’s (ʒɔrdɛn). 
7. tilbury . . . shandrydans: two-wheeled carriages and rickety vehicles.

Vocabulary
perpetually (pərˈpektəˈl] ə) adv.: constantly.
together, raising their shafts to heaven like a pair of arms, or else heads down and bottoms up.

Close to the people sitting at table, the bright fire blazing in the huge fireplace was scorching the backs of the row on the right. Three spits were turning, carrying chickens, pigeons, and legs of mutton; and a delicious smell of meat roasting and gravy trickling over browning flesh rose from the hearth, raising people’s spirits and making their mouths water.

All the aristocracy of the plow took its meals at Maitre Jourdain’s. Innkeeper and horse dealer, he was a cunning rascal who had made his pile.

Dishes were brought in and emptied, as were the jugs of yellow cider. Everybody talked about the business he had done, what he had bought and sold. News and views were exchanged about the crops. The weather was good for the greens but rather damp for the wheat.

All of a sudden the roll of a drum sounded in the courtyard in front of the inn. Except for one or two who showed no interest, everybody jumped up and ran to the door or windows with his mouth still full and his napkin in his hand.

After finishing his roll on the drum, the town crier made the following pronouncement, speaking in a jerky manner and pausing in the wrong places: “Let it be known to the inhabitants of Goderville, and in general to all—persons present at the market that there was lost this morning, on the Beuzeville road, between—nine and ten o’clock, a black leather wallet containing five hundred francs and some business documents. Anybody finding the same is asked to bring it immediately—to the town hall or to return it to Maitre Fortuné Houlbrecq of Manneville.

There will be a reward of twenty francs.”

Then the man went away. The dull roll of the drum and the faint voice of the town crier could be heard once again in the distance.

Everybody began talking about the incident, estimating Maitre Houlbrecq’s chances of recovering or not recovering his wallet.

The meal came to an end.

They were finishing their coffee when the police sergeant appeared at the door and asked: “Is Maitre Hauchecorne of Bréauté here?”

Maitre Hauchecorne, who was sitting at the far end of the table, replied: “Yes, here I am.”

The sergeant went on: “Maitre Hauchecorne, will you be good enough to come with me to the town hall? The Mayor would like to have a word with you.”

The peasant, surprised and a little worried, tossed down his glass of brandy, stood up, and even more bent than in the morning, for the first few steps after a rest were especially difficult, set off after the sergeant, repeating: “Here I am, here I am.”
The Mayor was waiting for him, sitting in an armchair. He was the local notary, a stout, solemn individual, with a penchant for pompous phrases.

"Maitre Haucheconne," he said, "you were seen this morning, on the Beuzeville road, picking up the wallet lost by Maitre Houlbrêque of Manneville."

The peasant gazed in astonishment at the Mayor, already frightened by this suspicion which had fallen upon him, without understanding why.

"Me? I picked up the wallet?"
"Yes, you."
"Honest, I don't know nothing about it."
"You were seen."
"I were seen? Who seen me?"
"Monsieur Malandain, the saddler."

Then the old man remembered, understood, and flushed with anger.

"So he seen me, did he, the bastard! He seen me pick up this bit of string, Mayor—look!"

And rummaging in his pocket, he pulled out the little piece of string.

But the Mayor shook his head incredulously.

"You'll never persuade me, Maitre Haucheconne, that Monsieur Malandain, who is a man who can be trusted, mistook that piece of string for a wallet."

The peasant angrily raised his hand and spat on the floor as proof of his good faith, repeating:

"But it's God's truth, honest it is! Not a word of it's a lie, so help me God!"

The Mayor went on: "After picking up the object you even went on hunting about in the mud for some time to see whether some coin might not have fallen out."

The old fellow was almost speechless with fear and indignation.

"Making up... making up... lies like that to damn an honest man! Making up lies like that!"

In spite of all his protestations, the Mayor did not believe him.

He was confronted with Maitre Malandain, who repeated and maintained his statement. They hurled insults at each other for an hour. Maitre Haucheconne was searched, at his own request. Nothing was found on him.

Finally the Mayor, not knowing what to think, sent him away, warning him that he was going to report the matter to the public prosecutor and ask for instructions.

The news had spread. As he left the town hall, the old man was surrounded by people who questioned him with a curiosity which was sometimes serious, sometimes ironical, but in which there was no indignation. He started telling the story of the piece of string. Nobody believed him. Everybody laughed.

As he walked along, other people stopped him, and he stopped his acquaintances, repeating his story and his protestations over and over again, and showing his pockets turned inside out to prove that he had got nothing.

Everybody said: "Get along with you, you old rascal!"

And he lost his temper, irritated, angered, and upset because nobody would believe him. Not knowing what to do, he simply went on repeating his story.

Darkness fell. It was time to go home. He set off with three of his neighbors to whom he pointed out the place where he had picked up the piece of string; and all the way home he talked of nothing else.

In the evening he took a turn round the village of Bréauté in order to tell everybody his story. He met with nothing but incredulity.

He felt ill all night as a result.

The next day, about one o'clock in the afternoon, Marius Paumelle, a laborer on Maitre Breton's farm at Ymauville, returned the wallet and its contents to Maitre Houlbrêque of Manneville.

11. Marius Paumelle (mä·rŷ-yōd' pō·mél').
12. Ymauville (ē·môv-vêl').

Vocabulary

penchant (pen'chant) n.: fondness for.
pompous (pám'pəs) adj.: self-important.
indignation (in'dig·nä'ʃən) n.: anger resulting from injustice.

incredulity (in'krä·döö's'la·tē) n.: disbelief; doubt.
The man claimed to have found the object on the road; but, as he could not read, he had taken it home and given it to his employer.

The news spread round the neighborhood and reached the ears of Maitre Hauchecorne. He immediately went out and about repeating his story, this time with its sequel. He was triumphant.

"What really got my goat," he said, "wasn't so much the thing itself, if you see what I mean, but the lies. There's nothing worse than being blamed on account of a lie."

He talked about his adventure all day; he told the story to people he met on the road, to people drinking in the inn, to people coming out of church the following Sunday. He stopped total strangers and told it to them. His mind was at rest now, and yet something still bothered him without his knowing exactly what it was. People seemed to be amused as they listened to him. They didn't appear to be convinced. He had the impression that remarks were being made behind his back.

The following Tuesday he went to the Goderville market, simply because he felt an urge to tell his story.

Malandain, standing at his door, burst out laughing when he saw him go by. Why?

He accosted a farmer from Cricquetot, who didn't let him finish his story, but gave him a dig in the ribs and shouted at him: "Go on, you old rogue!" Then he turned on his heels.

Maitre Hauchecorne was taken aback and felt increasingly uneasy. Why had he been called an old rogue?

Once he had sat down at table in Jourdain's inn, he started explaining the whole business all over again.

A horse dealer from Montivilliers called out to him: "Get along with you, you old rascal! I know your little game with the bit of string."

Hauchecorne stammered: "But they found the wallet!"

The other man retorted: "Give over, Grandpa!

Him as brings a thing back isn't always him as finds it. But mum's the word!"

The peasant was speechless. At last he understood. He was being accused of getting an accomplice to return the wallet.

He tried to protest, but the whole table burst out laughing.

He couldn't finish his meal and went off in the midst of jeers and laughter.

He returned home ashamed and indignant, choking with anger and embarrassment, all the more upset in that he was quite capable, with his Norman cunning, of doing what he was accused of having done, and even of boasting of it as a clever trick. He dimly realized that, since his duplicity was widely known, it was impossible to prove his innocence. And the injustice of the suspicion cut him to the quick.

Then he began telling the story all over again, making it longer every day, adding fresh arguments at every telling, more energetic protestations, more solemn oaths, which he thought out and prepared in his hours of solitude, for he could think of nothing else but the incident of the piece of string. The more complicated his defense became, and the more subtle his arguments, the less people believed him.

"Them's a liar's arguments," people used to say behind his back.

Realizing what was happening, he ate his heart out, exhausting himself in futile efforts.

He started visibly wasting away.

The local wags now used to get him to tell the story of the piece of string to amuse them, as people get an old soldier to talk about his battles. His mind, seriously affected, began to give way.

Towards the end of December he took to his bed.

He died early in January, and in the delirium of his death agony he kept on protesting his innocence, repeating over and over again: "A bit of string... a little bit of string... look, Mayor, here it is..."