
A PAIR OF SILK STOCKINGS

Here is a story of escape—escape from the humdrum, from the obligations and boredom of day-to-day existence. Virtually all of us, probably even lion tamers, have wanted to escape like this in one way or another.

For Mrs. Sommers, the humdrum comes from trying to satisfy the needs of her poor family. Here we see a woman who has been doing her best to clothe and feed four children for a long time.

Her escape is sudden, and it is as surprising to her as it is to us. As you read, see if you are ever told that Mrs. Sommers makes a rational decision to embark on a pleasure binge. Does she think she deserves a break from routine? Or does she just go ahead and *do* it?

What is interesting in this story (since we've all known feelings like hers) is Mrs. Sommers's reaction to her escape. When her afternoon is ended and she must return to the reality of her family—

with just those silk stockings, what does she feel? Guilt? Happiness? A need for penance, or for *more* silk stockings in those gorgeous colors she failed to buy?

All of these feelings are possible to her, and Mrs. Sommers is surely experiencing one or another of them, but they are subtly shown here. Like many a good story, this one leaves us to do some guessing on our own about what Mrs. Sommers is feeling as we leave her on the streetcar.

You should know that in the 1890's silk stockings were a great luxury. (Nylon wasn't invented yet, and most women wore thick cotton stockings.) Also, fifteen dollars was a princely week's salary. As you'll see, it could buy far more than two tickets to the movies.

Read the story's first sentence, and then stop. Write down what *you* would do with an unexpected gift of money that amounted to a week's salary today.

Little Mrs. Sommers one day found herself the unexpected possessor of fifteen dollars. It seemed to her a very large amount of money, and the way in which it stuffed and bulged her worn old *porte-monnaie*¹ gave her a feeling of importance such as she had not enjoyed for years.

The question of investment was one that occupied her greatly. For a day or two she walked about apparently in a dreamy state, but really absorbed in speculation and calculation. She did not wish to act hastily, to do anything she might afterward regret. But it was during the still hours of the night when she lay awake revolving plans in her mind that she seemed to see her way clearly toward a proper and judicious use of the money.

A dollar or two should be added to the price usually paid for Janie's shoes, which would insure their lasting an appreciable time longer than they usually did. She would buy so and so many yards of percale² for new shirtwaists for the boys and

Janie and Mag. She had intended to make the old ones do by skillful patching. Mag should have another gown. She had seen some beautiful patterns, veritable bargains in the shop windows. And still there would be left enough for new stockings—two pairs apiece—and what darning that would save for a while! She would get caps for the boys and sailor hats for the girls. The vision of her little brood looking fresh and dainty and new for once in their lives excited her and made her restless and wakeful with anticipation.

The neighbors sometimes talked of certain "better days" that little Mrs. Sommers had known before she had ever thought of being Mrs. Sommers. She herself indulged in no such morbid retrospection.³ She had no time—no second of time to devote to the past. The needs of the present absorbed her every faculty. A vision of the future like some dim, gaunt monster sometimes appalled her, but luckily tomorrow never comes.

1. *porte-monnaie* (pôrt' môn-ně'): a purse.

2. *percale* (pər-kāl'): cloth made of cotton.

3. *morbid retrospection*: brooding on unpleasant things in the past.



Woman in veiled hat looking at a poster for Columbia bicycles. Page 5 from *Large Boston Public Garden Sketchbook* by Maurice Prendergast (c. 1895). Watercolor on paper.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Robert Lehman Collection, 1975. (1975.1.928).

Mrs. Sommers was one who knew the value of bargains, who could stand for hours making her way inch by inch toward the desired object that was selling below cost. She could elbow her way if need be; she had learned to clutch a piece of goods and hold it and stick to it with persistence and determination till her turn came to be served, no matter when it came.

But that day she was a little faint and tired. She

had swallowed a light luncheon—no! when she came to think of it, between getting the children fed and the place righted, and preparing herself for the shopping bout, she had actually forgotten to eat any luncheon at all!

She sat herself upon a revolving stool before a counter that was comparatively deserted, trying to gather strength and courage to charge through an eager multitude that was besieging breastworks⁴ of shirting and figured lawn. An all-gone limp feeling had come over her and she rested her hand aimlessly upon the counter. She wore no gloves. By degrees she grew aware that her hand had encountered something very soothing, very pleasant to touch. She looked down to see that her hand lay upon a pile of silk stockings. A placard nearby announced that they had been reduced in price from two dollars and fifty cents to one dollar and ninety-eight cents; and a young girl who stood behind the counter asked her if she wished to examine their line of silk hosiery. She smiled, just as if she had been asked to inspect a tiara of diamonds with the ultimate view of purchasing it. But she went on feeling the soft, sheeny luxurious things—with both hands now, holding them up to see them glisten, and to feel them glide serpentlike through her fingers.

Two hectic blotches came suddenly into her pale cheeks. She looked up at the girl.

“Do you think there are any eights-and-a-half among these?”

There were any number of eights-and-a-half. In fact, there were more of that size than any other. Here was a light-blue pair; there were some lavender, some all black and various shades of tan and gray. Mrs. Sommers selected a black pair and looked at them very long and closely. She pretended to be examining their texture, which the clerk assured her was excellent.

“A dollar and ninety-eight cents,” she mused aloud. “Well, I’ll take this pair.” She handed the girl a five-dollar bill and waited for her change and for her parcel. What a very small parcel it was! It seemed lost in the depths of her shabby old shopping bag.

Mrs. Sommers after that did not move in the direction of the bargain counter. She took the el-

4. **breastworks:** low walls put up as barricades. The bolts of shirting material and fine, patterned cotton (“figured lawn”) are compared to barricades being stormed by shoppers.

evator, which carried her to an upper floor into the region of the ladies' waiting rooms. Here, in a retired corner, she exchanged her cotton stockings for the new silk ones which she had just bought. She was not going through any acute mental process or reasoning with herself, nor was she striving to explain to her satisfaction the motive of her action. She was not thinking at all. She seemed for the time to be taking a rest from that laborious and fatiguing function and to have abandoned herself to some mechanical impulse that directed her actions and freed her of responsibility.

How good was the touch of the raw silk to her flesh! She felt like lying back in the cushioned chair and reveling for a while in the luxury of it. She did for a little while. Then she replaced her shoes, rolled the cotton stockings together and thrust them into her bag. After doing this she crossed straight over to the shoe department and took her seat to be fitted.

She was fastidious. The clerk could not make her out; he could not reconcile her shoes with her stockings, and she was not too easily pleased. She held back her skirts and turned her feet one way and her head another as she glanced down at the polished, pointed-tipped boots. Her foot and ankle looked very pretty. She could not realize that they belonged to her and were a part of herself. She wanted an excellent and stylish fit, she told the young fellow who served her, and she did not mind the difference of a dollar or two more in the price so long as she got what she desired.

It was a long time since Mrs. Sommers had been fitted with gloves. On rare occasions when she had bought a pair they were always "bargains," so cheap that it would have been preposterous and unreasonable to have expected them to be fitted to the hand.

Now she rested her elbow on the cushion of the glove counter, and a pretty, pleasant young creature, delicate and deft of touch, drew a long-wristed "kid" over Mrs. Sommers' hand. She smoothed it down over the wrist and buttoned it neatly, and both lost themselves for a second or two in admiring contemplation of the little symmetrical gloved hand. But there were other places where money might be spent.

There were books and magazines piled up in the window of a stall a few paces down the street. Mrs. Sommers bought two high-priced magazines

such as she had been accustomed to read in the days when she had been accustomed to other pleasant things. She carried them without wrapping. As well as she could she lifted her skirts at the crossings. Her stockings and boots and well-fitting gloves had worked marvels in her bearing—had given her a feeling of assurance, a sense of belonging to the well-dressed multitude.

She was very hungry. Another time she would have stilled the cravings for food until reaching her own home, where she would have brewed herself a cup of tea and taken a snack of anything that was available. But the impulse that was guiding her would not suffer her to entertain any such thought.

There was a restaurant at the corner. She had never entered its doors; from the outside she had sometimes caught glimpses of spotless damask and shining crystal, and soft-stepping waiters serving people of fashion.

When she entered her appearance created no surprise, no consternation, as she had half feared it might. She seated herself at a small table alone, and an attentive waiter at once approached to take her order. She did not want a profusion; she craved a nice and tasty bite—a half dozen blue-points,⁵ a plump chop with cress, a something sweet—a *crème-frappée*,⁶ for instance; a glass of Rhine wine, and after all a small cup of black coffee.

While waiting to be served she removed her gloves very leisurely and laid them beside her. Then she picked up a magazine and glanced through it, cutting the pages with a blunt edge of her knife.⁷ It was all very agreeable. The damask was even more spotless than it had seemed through the window, and the crystal more sparkling. There were quiet ladies and gentlemen, who did not notice her, lunching at the small tables like her own. A soft, pleasing strain of music could be heard, and a gentle breeze was blowing through the window. She tasted a bite, and she read a word or two, and she sipped the amber wine and wiggled her toes in the silk stockings. The price of it made no difference. She counted the money out to the waiter and left an extra coin on his tray,

5. **bluepoints:** small oysters.

6. **crème-frappée** (krēm frā-pā'): a dessert similar to ice cream.

7. Magazines and books were often printed with pages joined at their outer edges and had to be cut apart to be read.

whereupon he bowed before her as before a princess of royal blood.

There was still money in her purse, and her next temptation presented itself in the shape of a matinée poster.

It was a little later when she entered the theater, the play had begun and the house seemed to her to be packed. But there were vacant seats here and there, and into one of them she was ushered, between brilliantly dressed women who had gone there to kill time and eat candy and display their gaudy attire. There were many others who were there solely for the play and acting. It is safe to say there was no one present who bore quite the attitude which Mrs. Sommers did to her surroundings. She gathered in the whole—stage and players and people in one wide impression, and absorbed

it and enjoyed it. She laughed at the comedy and wept—she and the gaudy woman next to her wept over the tragedy. And they talked a little together over it. And the gaudy woman wiped her eyes and sniffed on a tiny square of filmy, perfumed lace and passed little Mrs. Sommers her box of candy.

The play was over, the music ceased, the crowd filed out. It was like a dream ended. People scattered in all directions. Mrs. Sommers went to the corner and waited for the cable car.

A man with keen eyes, who sat opposite to her, seemed to like the study of her small, pale face. It puzzled him to decipher what he saw there. In truth, he saw nothing—unless he were wizard enough to detect a poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever.

Responding to the Story

Analyzing the Story

Identifying Facts

1. What at first does Mrs. Sommers intend to do with the money? What does she end up doing with it instead?

Interpreting Meanings

2. How do you interpret that final wish of Mrs. Sommers—that the cable car will go on and on without ever stopping? What do you predict will happen next?
3. The author describes her as “Little Mrs. Sommers.” We are given a few further details about her—four children, no mention of a husband or job, a future she regards as a “dim, gaunt monster.” She lacks the time to recall her “better days.” What do you think of the **character** of Mrs. Sommers? How do you feel about what she does with the fifteen dollars?
4. What details about Mrs. Sommers’s earlier life might help explain the **motivation** for her shopping spree?
5. What do you think the rest of Mrs. Sommers’s life will be like? (Do you think she’ll ever wear those black stockings again?) Discuss your answers.

6. When Mrs. Sommers feels the black stockings, they “glide serpentlike” through her fingers. What does a serpent often **symbolize** in Western culture? Explain whether or not you think the use of the word here is significant.
7. A **feminist critic** might say that this story is about a woman who strikes out for personal freedom and identity. A **Marxist critic** might say it is about the class struggle. Critic Barbara C. Ewell says:

The power of money to enhance self-esteem and confidence is the core of this poignant tale.

- Which critic do you agree with? What do *you* think is the core of the story?
8. This story is over a hundred years old. Do you think it is an old-fashioned story, which could not happen today? Or is the story still modern? (Could you see little Mrs. Sommers in a TV sitcom?) Could Mrs. Sommers’s **conflict** also be experienced by a man? (What of her unnamed husband?) Discuss your responses.