

# A Piece of STRING

Guy de Maupassant



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1850–1893

## The Well-Crafted Story

Guy de Maupassant (gē' də mō-pă-săn') is considered by many to be the greatest French short story writer, and he has been an inspiration to generations of European and American writers. He always presented his characters objectively—not judging them but simply recording their actions. And with remarkable precision, he focused

on the exact gesture, feeling, or word that defined each character's personality. The effect was to make his perfectly crafted stories seem, in his words, "to be pieces of human existence torn from reality."

**Unremarkable Beginnings** Maupassant was born to upper-middle-class parents in the French province of Normandy. After high school, he served in the French army and studied law in Paris. In his early 20s, he took a clerical position with the French government, a job he disliked but apparently succeeded at.

**Becoming a Writer** When he was a young writer, Maupassant's inspiration and guide was Gustave Flaubert (gōō-stāv' flō-bâr'), the author of *Madame Bovary* (1857) and other realistic works. Flaubert was a

friend of Maupassant's mother and invited the young Maupassant regularly to his house in Paris for lunch and conversation. At these lunches, Flaubert discussed writing style and technique, and he critiqued pieces that Maupassant had written. Flaubert also introduced the young writer to leading literary figures, such as the naturalistic writer Émile Zola (ā-mēl' zō-lă'). Though Maupassant disliked being labeled, he did develop a naturalistic tone in his own work.

**Rich and Famous** Maupassant's first short story, "Ball of Fat," appeared in 1880 in an anthology compiled by Émile Zola. This story, considered to be one of his best, made Maupassant famous. Over the next 10 years, he produced an enormous amount of work: more than 300 short stories, six novels, three travel books, and one book of poetry. He sold his stories to magazines and newspapers, published them in collections, and eventually grew quite rich. But Maupassant enjoyed his success only a short time before his deteriorating health overcame him. He died in an asylum from complications of an incurable disease a month before his 43rd birthday.

## Other Works

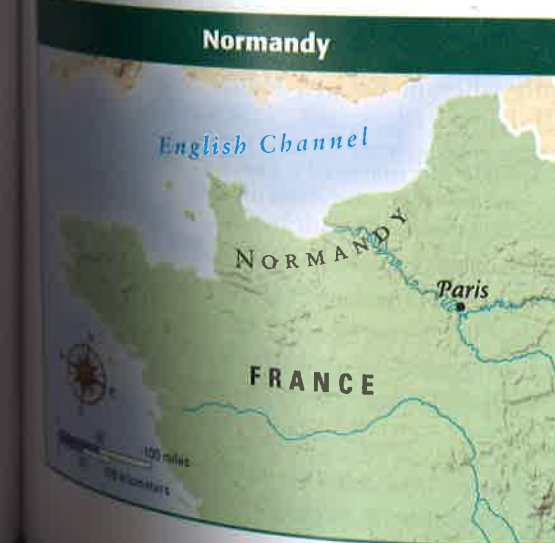
"The Necklace"  
"The Jewelry"  
"The Umbrella"  
*A Life*  
*Good Friend*

## Build Background

**Maupassant's Norman Roots** "A Piece of String" is set in Normandy, a farming region of northern France. A beautiful area of low hills, fields, and hedges, Normandy is famous for its butter, cheeses, and apple cider. When Maupassant was a boy, he had many opportunities to observe Norman peasants. These small-scale farmers generally led difficult lives. Peasant families consumed most of what they raised and sold the rest in open-air markets. Some traditional Norman markets are still in existence today. Maupassant once wrote of Normandy:

*I love this land, and I love to live in it because my roots are here, those deep and delicate roots that attach a man to the land where his fathers were born and died, attach him to the thoughts men think, the food they eat, the words they use, their peasant drail; to the odors that rise from the soil and the villages and linger in the very air itself.*

Despite this deep attachment, he avoided sentimentality in his Norman stories. The peasants he portrays are sometimes stingy, coarse, and cruel. Maupassant wanted his fiction to be true to life, even if that life was unpleasant. Like other realist writers associated with naturalism, he was especially interested in how people's social circumstances and natural drives can determine their fates.



## Connect to Your Life

How do you think you would feel if you were falsely accused of wrongdoing? How might such an experience affect the way you interact with people? Share your thoughts with the class.

## Focus Your Reading

### LITERARY ANALYSIS: CHARACTERIZATION IN REALISM

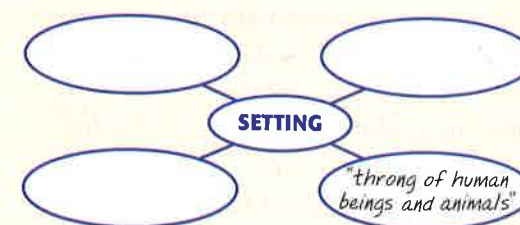
**Characterization** refers to the techniques used to develop characters. Writers can portray characters through physical description, characters' words and actions, the words and actions of other characters, and direct commentary by the narrator.

Because realist writers are concerned with examination of character, characterization is an important element in their works. As you read this story, notice which techniques Maupassant uses.

### ACTIVE READING: INTERPRETING DETAILS

"A Piece of String" is filled with **details** that help create a realistic impression of the people and way of life described in the story. Interpreting these details will help you draw conclusions about Maupassant's characters and themes.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** As you read the story, create cluster diagrams like the one below to help you organize descriptive details. Create one diagram for the setting; another for the main character, Maître Hauchecome; and a third for the peasants in general.



### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

credence      impassive      indignation  
din      indifferent



# A Piece of String

Guy de Maupassant

**A**long all the roads around Goderville<sup>1</sup> the peasants and their wives were coming toward the burgh<sup>2</sup> because it was market day. The men were proceeding with slow steps, the whole body bent forward at each movement of their long twisted legs, deformed by their hard work, by the weight on the plow which, at the same time, raised the left shoulder and swerved the figure, by the reaping of the wheat which made the knees spread to make a firm "purchase,"<sup>3</sup> by all the slow and painful labors of the country. Their blouses, blue, "stiff-starched," shining as if varnished, ornamented with a little design in white at the neck and wrists, puffed about their bony bodies, seemed like balloons ready to carry them off. From each of them a head, two arms, and two feet protruded.

Some led a cow or a calf by a cord, and their wives, walking behind the animal, whipped its haunches with a leafy branch to hasten its progress. They carried large baskets on their arms from which, in some cases, chickens and, in others, ducks thrust out their heads. And they walked with a quicker, livelier step than their husbands. Their spare straight figures were wrapped in a scanty little shawl, pinned over their flat bosoms, and their heads were enveloped in a white cloth glued to the hair and surmounted<sup>4</sup> by a cap.

Then a wagon passed at the jerky trot of a nag, shaking strangely, two men seated side by side and a woman in the bottom of the vehicle, the latter holding on to the sides to lessen the hard jolts.

In the public square of Goderville there was a crowd, a throng of human beings and animals mixed together. The horns of the cattle, the tall hats with long nap of the rich peasant, and the headgear of the peasant women rose above the surface of the assembly. And the clamorous, shrill, screaming voices made a continuous and savage *din* which sometimes was dominated by the robust lungs of some countryman's laugh, or the long lowing of a cow tied to the wall of a house.

All that smacked of the stable, the dairy and the dirt heap, hay and sweat, giving forth that unpleasant odor, human and animal, peculiar to the people of the field.

Maître Hauchecome, of Breauté,<sup>5</sup> had just arrived at Goderville, and he was directing his steps toward the public square, when he perceived upon the ground a little piece of string. Maître Hauchecome, economical like a true Norman, thought that everything useful ought to be picked up, and he bent painfully, for he suffered from rheumatism. He took the bit of thin cord from the ground and began to roll it carefully when he noticed Maître Malandain,<sup>6</sup> the

1. Goderville (gôd-ər-vêl'): a town in Normandy (a region of northwest France), about ten miles inland from the English Channel.

2. burgh (bûrg): town.

3. purchase: a position of the body necessary in order to move a large weight.

4. surmounted (sər-moun'tîd): topped.

5. Maître Hauchecome (mă'trə ôsh-côm'), of Breauté (bre-ô): Maître is French for *master*. Breauté, like most of the other places mentioned in the story, was a small farming community within a few miles of Goderville.

6. Malandain (mă-lăn-dăn').

## WORDS TO KNOW

*din* (dîn) *n.* a loud, confused noise

... they were on bad terms, being both good haters. Maître Hauchecome was seized with a sort of shame to be seen thus by his enemy, picking a bit of string out of the dirt."

harness-maker, on the threshold of his door, looking at him. They had heretofore had business together on the subject of a halter,<sup>7</sup> and they were on bad terms, being both good haters. Maître Hauchecome was seized with a sort of shame to be seen thus by his enemy, picking a bit of string out of the dirt. He concealed his "find" quickly under his blouse, then in his trousers' pocket; then he pretended to be still looking on the ground for something which he did not find, and he went toward the market, his head forward, bent double by his pains.

He was soon lost in the noisy and slowly moving crowd, which was busy with interminable bargainings. The peasants milked, went and came, perplexed, always in fear of being cheated, not daring to decide, watching the vender's eye, ever trying to find the trick in the man and the flaw in the beast.

The women, having placed their great baskets at their feet, had taken out the poultry which lay upon the ground, tied together by the feet, with terrified eyes and scarlet crests.

They heard offers, stated their prices with a dry and impassive face, or perhaps, suddenly deciding on some proposed reduction, shouted to the customer who was slowly going away: "All right, Maître Authirne,<sup>8</sup> I'll give it to you for that."

Then little by little the square was deserted, and the Angelus<sup>9</sup> ringing at noon, those who had stayed too long, scattered to their shops. At Jourdain's<sup>10</sup> the great room was full of

people eating, as the big court was full of vehicles of all kinds, carts, gigs, wagons, dump carts, yellow with dirt, mended and patched, raising their shafts to the sky like two arms, or perhaps with their shafts in the ground and their backs in the air.

Just opposite the diners seated at the table, the immense fireplace, filled with bright flames, cast a lively heat on the backs of the row on the right. Three spits were turning on which were chickens, pigeons, and legs of mutton; and an appetizing odor of roast beef and gravy dripping over the nicely browned skin rose from the hearth, increased the jovialness,<sup>11</sup> and made everybody's mouth water.

All the aristocracy of the plow<sup>12</sup> ate there, at Maître Jourdain's, tavern keeper and horse dealer, a rascal who had money.

The dishes were passed and emptied, as were the jugs of yellow cider. Everyone told his affairs, his purchases, and sales. They discussed the crops. The weather was favorable for the green things but not for the wheat.

7. halter: strap with a noose by which horses are tied or led.

8. Maître Authirne (ô-tûrn').

9. Angelus (ăn'jə-ləs): the church bells that ring to announce the Angelus prayer, which is recited at morning, noon, and evening.

10. Jourdain's (zhôor-dănz').

11. jovialness: state of heartiness and good cheer.

12. aristocracy of the plow: humorous way of referring to farmers.

## WORDS TO KNOW

*impassive* (îm-păs'îv) *adj.* revealing no emotion; expressionless



Suddenly the drum beat in the court, before the house. Everybody rose except a few indifferent persons, and ran to the door, or to the windows, their mouths still full and napkins in their hands.

After the public crier had ceased his drum-beating, he called out in a jerky voice, speaking his phrases irregularly:

"It is hereby made known to the inhabitants of Goderville, and in general to all persons present at the market, that there was lost this morning, on the road to Benzeville,<sup>13</sup> between nine and ten o'clock, a black leather pocketbook containing five hundred francs<sup>14</sup> and some business papers. The finder is requested to return same with all haste to the mayor's office or to Maître Fortune Houlbrequé of Manneville,<sup>15</sup> there will be twenty francs reward."

Then the man went away. The heavy roll of the drum and the crier's voice were again heard at a distance.

Then they began to talk of this event, discussing the chances that Maître Houlbrequé had of finding or not finding his pocketbook.

And the meal concluded. They were finishing their coffee when a chief of the gendarmes<sup>16</sup> appeared upon the threshold.

He inquired:

"Is Maître Hauchecome, of Breaute, here?"

Maître Hauchecome, seated at the other end of the table, replied:

"Here I am."

And the officer resumed:

"Maître Hauchecome, will you have the goodness to accompany me to the mayor's office? The mayor would like to talk to you."

The peasant, surprised and disturbed, swallowed at a draft his tiny glass of brandy, rose, and, even more bent than in the morning, for the first steps after each rest were specially difficult, set out, repeating: "Here I am, here I am."

The mayor was awaiting him, seated on an

armchair. He was the notary<sup>17</sup> of the vicinity, a stout, serious man, with pompous<sup>18</sup> phrases.

"Maître Hauchecome," said he, "you were seen this morning to pick up, on the road to Benzeville, the pocketbook lost by Maître Houlbrequé, of Manneville."

The countryman, astounded, looked at the mayor, already terrified, by this suspicion resting on him without his knowing why.

"Me? Me? Me pick up the pocketbook?"

"Yes, you, yourself."

"Word of honor, I never heard of it."

"But you were seen."

"I was seen, me? Who says he saw me?"

"Monsieur Malandain, the harness-maker."

The old man remembered, understood, and flushed with anger.

"Ah, he saw me, the clodhopper, he saw me pick up this string, here, M'sieu'<sup>19</sup> the Mayor." And rummaging in his pocket he drew out the little piece of string.

But the mayor, incredulous, shook his head.

"You will not make me believe, Maître Hauchecome, that Monsieur Malandain, who is a man worthy of credence, mistook this cord for a pocketbook."

The peasant, furious, lifted his hand, spat at one side to attest<sup>20</sup> his honor, repeating:

"It is nevertheless the truth of the good God, the sacred truth, M'sieu' the Mayor. I repeat it

13. Benzeville (bănz-vél').

14. francs: The franc is the basic monetary unit of France.

15. Fortune Houlbrequé (fôr-tün' ôôl-brék') of Manneville (măn-vél').

16. gendarmes (zhăn'dărmz'): armed police.

17. notary: a person with the legal authority to witness and certify documents.

18. pompous (pôm'pəs): full of self-importance.

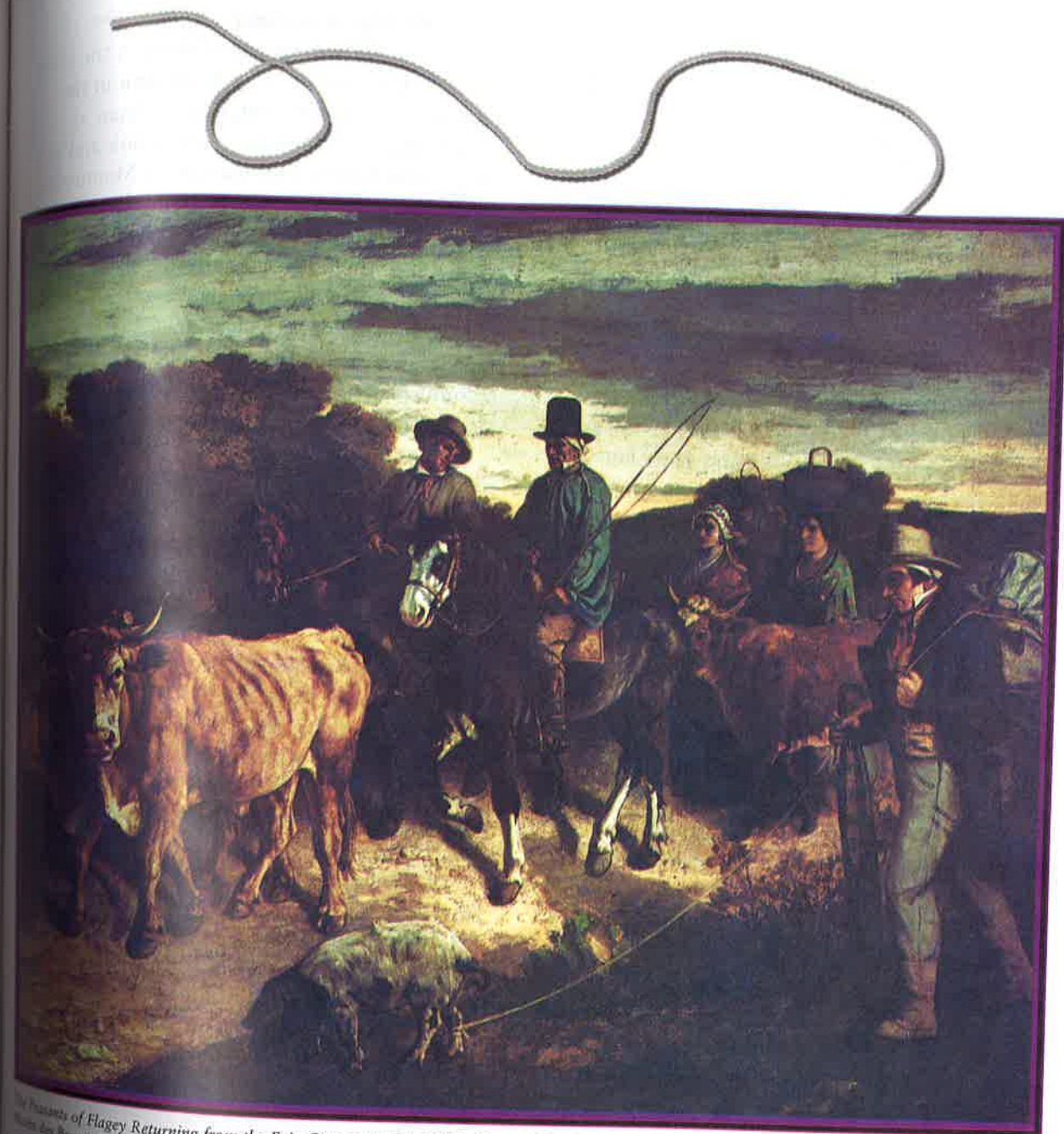
19. M'sieu' (mă-syœ'): a shortened form of *monsieur*, French for *master* or *sir*.

20. attest (ə-tĕst'): testify to; affirm.

#### WORDS TO KNOW

**indifferent** (ĭn-dĭf'ər-ənt) *adj.* having no particular interest or concern

**credence** (krĕd'ns) *n.* belief; trust



Peasants of Flagey Returning from the Fair, Ornans (1850-1855), Gustave Courbet. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Besançon, France/Giraudon/Art Resource, New York.

**HUMANITIES CONNECTION** This painting caused a stir in the Paris art world of the 1850s because it showed peasants as they really were rather than in some romanticized, sentimental way. The critics did not think that Courbet's realistic portrayal of such people was fitting in a work of art.



on my soul and my salvation.”

The mayor resumed:

“After picking up the object, you stood like a stilt, looking a long while in the mud to see if any piece of money had fallen out.”

The good, old man choked with indignation and fear.

“How anyone can tell—how anyone can tell—such lies to take away an honest man’s reputation! How can anyone—”

There was no use in his protesting, nobody believed him. He was confronted with Monsieur Malandain, who repeated and maintained his affirmation.<sup>21</sup> They abused each other for an hour. At his own request, Maître Hauchecome was searched, nothing was found on him.

Finally the mayor, very much perplexed, discharged him with the warning that he would consult the public prosecutor and ask for further orders.

The news had spread. As he left the mayor’s office, the old man was surrounded and questioned with a serious or bantering<sup>22</sup> curiosity, in which there was no indignation. He began to tell the story of the string. No one believed him. They laughed at him.

He went along, stopping his friends, beginning endlessly his statement and his protestations, showing his pockets turned inside out, to prove that he had nothing.

They said:

“Old rascal, get out!”

And he grew angry, becoming exasperated, hot, and distressed at not being believed, not knowing what to do and always repeating himself.

Night came. He must depart. He started on his way with three neighbors to whom he pointed out the place where he had picked up the bit of string; and all along the road he spoke of his adventure.

In the evening he took a turn in the village of Breaute, in order to tell it to everybody. He only met with incredulity.<sup>23</sup>

It made him ill at night.

The next day about one o’clock in the afternoon, Marius Paumelle, a hired man in the employ of Maître Breton, husbandman at Ymanville,<sup>24</sup> returned the pocketbook and its contents to Maître Houlbrequé of Manneville.

This man claimed to have found the object in the road; but not knowing how to read, he had carried it to the house and given it to his employer.

The news spread through the neighborhood. Maître Hauchecome was informed of it. He immediately went the circuit and began to recount his story completed by the happy climax. He was in triumph.

“What grieved me so much was not the thing itself, as the lying. There is nothing so shameful as to be placed under a cloud on account of a lie.”

He talked of his adventure all day long, he told it on the highway to people who were passing by, in the wineshop to people who were drinking there, and to persons coming out of church the following Sunday. He stopped strangers to tell them about it. He was calm now, and yet something disturbed him without his knowing exactly what it was. People had the air of joking while they listened. They did not seem convinced. He seemed to feel that remarks were being made behind his back.

On Tuesday of the next week he went to the market at Goderville, urged solely by the necessity he felt of discussing the case.

Malandain, standing at his door, began to laugh on seeing him pass. Why?

21. affirmation: something declared to be true.

22. bantering: spoken in a teasing or playful way.

23. incredulity (ÿn’krÿ-dōō’ÿ-tē): unwillingness or inability to believe; doubt.

24. Paumelle (pō-mēl’) . . . Breton (brē-tōn’), husbandman at Ymanville (ÿ-mān-vēl’): Husbandman means “farmer.”

“A piece of string, a piece of string—  
look—here it is,  
M’sieu’ the Mayor.”

He approached a farmer from Crequetot,<sup>25</sup> who did not let him finish, and giving him a thump in the stomach said to his face:

“You big rascal.”

Then he turned his back on him.

Maître Hauchecome was confused, why was he called a big rascal?

When he was seated at the table, in Jourdain’s tavern he commenced to explain “the affair.”

A horse dealer from Monvilliers<sup>26</sup> called to him:

“Come, come, old sharper, that’s an old trick; I know all about your piece of string!”

Hauchecome stammered:

“But since the pocketbook was found.”

But the other man replied:

“Shut up, papa, there is one that finds, and there is one that reports. At any rate you are mixed with it.”

The peasant stood choking. He understood. They accused him of having had the pocketbook returned by a confederate, by an accomplice.

He tried to protest. All the table began to laugh.

He could not finish his dinner and went away, in the midst of jeers.

He went home ashamed and indignant, choking with anger and confusion, the more dejected that he was capable with his Norman cunning of doing what they had accused him of, and even boasting of it as of a good turn. His innocence to him, in a confused way, was impossible to prove,

as his sharpness was known. And he was stricken to the heart by the injustice of the suspicion.

Then he began to recount the adventures again, prolonging his history every day, adding each time, new reasons, more energetic protestations, more solemn oaths which he imagined and prepared in his hours of solitude, his whole mind given up to the story of the string. He was believed so much the less as his defense was more complicated and his arguing more subtle.

“Those are lying excuses,” they said behind his back.

He felt it, consumed his heart over it, and wore himself out with useless efforts. He wasted away before their very eyes.

The wags<sup>27</sup> now made him tell about the string to amuse them, as they make a soldier who has been on a campaign tell about his battles. His mind, touched to the depth, began to weaken.

Toward the end of December he took to his bed.

He died in the first days of January, and in the delirium of his death struggles he kept claiming his innocence, reiterating:

“A piece of string, a piece of string—look—here it is, M’sieu’ the Mayor.” ♦

25. Crequetot (krēk-tō’).

26. Monvilliers (mōn-vē-yēr’). Also spelled Montvilliers.

27. wags: people who like to make jokes.

#### WORDS TO KNOW