

PEARLS

While watching the drops of rain fall on the windowsill, and hearing the noise as they beat on the glass, who hasn't thought: "If only those drops were 5 duro coins!" And then, after thinking about this for a moment, who has not also thought of the problems that this sudden richness would bring to our economy and which, in the long run, would create an enormous state of poverty. "So maybe they should only fall in the patio of my house!" Because, the fact is, that there would be nothing more worthless than gold on the day that it becomes as common as tin. Something that is found everywhere, is scorned. No one values something that doesn't cause envy, and even good health would be considered of little importance, if there were no sick people.

What precious stones, what valuable possessions, or what luxurious objects, could ever compare to ordinary flowers that have so many vivid colors and sweet perfumes? On the other hand, what is more common than flowers? It is true that there have been times when they were considered quite valuable, especially in places where they were scarce. But then, they usually lost their value once the climate changed, or an easy way to obtain them was found.

Something that just happened during the popular Leipzig Trade Fair, where the most reputable German jewelers go to buy their wares, has contributed to the opinion we have about the reason some objects lose their value.

It seems a merchant from Ceylon, who had previously never attended the Trade Fair, came there this year with a collection of pearls that were so large and so gorgeous they could have justifiably been considered the best of all the pearls, in a market where they were already quite plentiful.

At first, the matter was not of particular importance; but then, a strange story which seemed like a fairytale began to spread through the entire city of Leipzig.

It was said that the merchant, who was not known to those in the trade, was a former diver who had discovered an extraordinary shoal, where all the shells that covered it held a good-sized pearl. This account seemed incredible at first; but then, taking into account the fact that, if it were not true, there was no way he could have had such a large number of pearls that were never found by the Government fisheries, and a real state of alarm began to spread through the buyers.

It is known that the fisheries of Ceylon belong to the State which owns the islands, that those who lease them from the Government must pay a considerable price, and only those who have the resources would be able to undertake an expensive enterprise that involves hundreds of men. How could a single individual, working all by himself, have been able to discover such a large quantity of pearls, something that would normally have taken a huge number of divers to find?

The official fisheries have never reported the existence of an underwater shoal like the one that was spoken of in Leipzig; but everything seems to indicate that it actually exists and, now that it has been found, it will probably flood the market with pearls so that what has been considered a rare jewel, costing an arm and a leg, will become quite common.

The supremacy of pearls will come to an end, and this cry of anguish, coming from all of the jewelers of Germany, has found an echo in the most elegant *boudoirs* of all the ladies of Europe.

It was feared, and with good reason, that very soon people would start telling another of these strange stories, such as one where, in exchange for some indiscretion, young men would be given precious stones that would then turn into coal.

Meanwhile, diamonds are trembling, fearing that the time will come when a chemist will knock them off their throne by creating pure carbon; thanks to the growth of science, the most precious materials are waiting for their inevitable loss of value; but the pearl, the “drop of dew” as the poets of India call it, that “tear of dawn lost in the depths of the sea,” according to an orientalist, has been so difficult to acquire that it was considered something which would never lose its value, as it rested proudly on the shoulders of our ladies, and adorned their hair, or decorated their arms.

Nevertheless, its day of reckoning has arrived. A vain attempt is made to hide the crisis until jewelers in Germany and merchants in Holland are able to sell all their pearls. But then, at the same time, an English newspaper and two magazines in Belgium sound the voice of alarm.

Pearls begin to disappear from the catalogs of precious stones. Women no longer look at them with a sigh of envy, as they see the illuminated displays in jewelry stores, and they no longer play an important part in love stories. Nevertheless, their past history is still as brilliant as it has always been. There has been a great deal of discussion about the first export of this precious jewel, an object of great importance in the commerce of India and other Eastern countries. Homer never mentions pearls and because of this some have insisted that they were not known until they were worn by the Romans. However, in the *Book of Job* and in *Proverbs*, pearls are spoken of, so it seems undeniable that, at least among the Jews, they have been known of since very remote times.

The first famous pearl that History speaks of, that is, the first which was important enough to be mentioned, is the one given by Julius Cesar to Servilia, the sister of Cato of Utica. Today it is impossible to know anything about its quality or its size, and we do not know for certain how much pearls were worth at the time; however, it is safe to say that it was not a mere pittance, since it is said that it cost the gallant Cesar nearly six thousand sesterces, or approximately five thousand reals.

Something like this is undoubtedly the origin of an old Roman proverb which says that “A pearl worn on the bosom of a beautiful woman serves as a bodyguard, since it divides her from the masses, and gives its owner the admiration and respect of all who see it.”

There has been a great deal of change in social relations, but it can be said that pearls sometimes play the part of Cupid. How many can say they have not been smitten by the sight of a necklace of pearls worn by a beautiful woman, a sort of rainbow in a storm, the vague promise of a desired gift? But let’s get back to Rome. Contrary to what some historians have tried to tell us, Roman women were like all women: they loved luxury and ostentation, and they often were whimsical and unpredictable. Based on this, there is no reason to say that, once they became known and were still a novelty, the love of pearls occurred spontaneously among the beautiful sex.

They wore them in their hair, in their ears, over their bosom, and on their arms. They were worn on tunics, on veils, on cloaks, and even on boots. They were embedded in crockery, in vases, in furniture, and also in walls. And after the women, came the men. Pompey marched triumphantly into Rome with thirty crowns of pearls resting at his feet, and once Alexandria had been conquered and was the center of commerce, both Caligula and Nero used them to adorn the armor of their fierce war-horses.

For those who criticize the luxury of our women today, saying that it is scandalous and immoral, we would like to invite them to attend one of those brilliant Roman *soirées* or *thés dansants* where there were people like Julia Paulina, who went around every day as though they were wearing nothing special, with a fortune in pearls, precious stones, and other gewgaws, of the same sort.

And now that we have spoken of the excessive use of pearls, it would seem there is no way it could be outdone; but that's not the way it was: those who tried to do everything they could to become even more lavish than their predecessors started breaking them up and serving them at banquets, sprinkled like tiny drops over plates of food. It was said, "they would crush pearls that were small and poorly formed." So everything is possible. In Rome, as in Madrid, there are those who tried, and were not able; but vanity is quite ingenious, and it always finds a way to overcome its limitations.

It became the custom that, as the feast began, the host, or hostess, would take a large pearl and crush it in the presence of the guests who were waiting to eat.

It is not known how digestible pearls were, but we can be certain that the memory of one of these banquets, where they played such an important role, would make our nerves cringe, just thinking of how the particles would grate between our teeth.

Even after these days of splendor, pearls have continued to be popular in the elegant realm of the centuries and cultures that followed. From the famous pearl that Cleopatra offered to Mark Antonio soaked in vinegar, to the famous pearls of Buckingham, and those in the Court of Louis XIII, pearls have played an important part in thousands of historic love stories.

And of all these anecdotes, there is only one more that we want to mention. After what we have written, some of our readers will think with a sigh of the pearls that are lying in the jewelry-box of their *boudoir*, which now will perhaps have no more value than the glass beads given to the natives by the discoverers of the New World.

So here is that anecdote, which is real history, and not just a story.

The Princess of J*** is undoubtedly the most beautiful woman in the court of Vienna. This is shown by the looks of envy coming from all of her rivals, and by the select group of young admirers *comm'il faut* of Vienna, since also in Vienna there are admirers. Some praise the majesty of her appearance, and others, the fire in her eyes; some, her delicate hands, and others, her graceful figure; and still more go into raptures over her feet, or her mouth, or her nose, or the delicate shape of her ear. All around her there is a concert of praises, so that her ears have become accustomed to this admiration, like music that is both familiar, and expected.

One night the Prince of J*** entered the *boudoir* of his wife while she prepared for a dance and offered her a pearl to commemorate the anniversary of their wedding. It was a gigantic pearl that was magnificent in its gentle opacity and its varying colors, making it stand out as one of the most remarkable pearls the sea had ever produced.

Pleased with it, the Princess placed it on her head, where the hair was parted over her brow like two dark waves, and then marched off to the dance.

"What a gorgeous pearl! What a magnificent pearl! It must be worth a fortune! There can be no other like it!"

These were some of the exclamations that greeted her as she entered the circle of admirers. What a lovely pearl! What an amazing pearl! But no one said anything about her eyes, nor did they mention her gracious smile, her pretty face, or her elegant figure.

When the Princess returned to her home after the dance, it is said that she shouted with fury, throwing the pearl on the floor and stomping on it: “What a fool I was! Who ever told me to wear this pearl to the dance, the only thing that could be my rival since, like me, it is unique in Vienna?”

This is how women react, then, if by chance, someone deprives them of one of their favorite ornaments.

So the story about the pearl that we have just recounted is, more or less, the story of all the pearls in the world.

Beautiful women seem all the more lovely when dressed simply, with no ornaments, and ugly ones, if it is true that there is an ugly woman in Spain, are even less attractive, when they adorn themselves.

And as for the loss of value, that is not as important for our readers as it would be for jewelers like Samper and Pizzala.