

A NECKLACE OF EMERALDS

We had stopped for a moment on San Jerónimo Street in front of Durán's store where I was trying to understand the title of a book by Méry. Since the strange title had caught my attention, I asked the friend who was with me about it. He took hold of my arm and replied in the following way:

"Today is a very nice day; so let's take a walk by the Fuente Castellana and, while we are walking I will tell you a story, in which I am the main character. After hearing it, you will have no trouble understanding what the title means, because then it will be perfectly clear."

I had a lot to do, but since I am always willing to put things off for a while, I accepted my friend's offer, and he began to tell his story:

"One night some time ago, after looking at the displays of paintings and photographs in several different shops, I walked around, not looking for anything in particular. While I was wandering, I thought about stopping at Saboyano's to buy some bronzes that I could use to adorn my house, if I ever had one. But then, remembering the objects of art and finery that are displayed in some of the shop windows, I stopped a moment in front of Samper's Jewelry store.

I don't know how long I was there, imagining what I might give to pretty girls I know: a pearl necklace for this one, a diamond cross for that one; earrings of amethyst and gold for another. Then, I was trying to imagine to whom I would give a magnificent emerald necklace that was so rich and elegant that it caught my attention, when I heard a sweet, soft voice that awakened me from my daydream when it said:

"What beautiful emeralds!"

I turned my head toward the place where I heard the woman's voice, because a voice which sounded like that could only belong to a woman. And it was, in fact, the voice of a very beautiful woman. I was only able to see her for a moment, but even then her beauty made a profound impression on me.

A carriage had stopped in front of the doorway of the jewelry shop where she had just come out. She was accompanied by an older woman, too young to be her mother, and too old to be her friend. When both had climbed into the carriage, which evidently belonged to her, the horses started trotting away, and I stood there gawking like a fool, until it was lost from sight.

'What beautiful emeralds!' she had said. Indeed, the emeralds were gorgeous; if they were draped around her white neck they would look like a garland of green leaves sprinkled with drops of dew; if it were dangling over her bosom, that necklace would look like a lotus flower when it was rocked by a wave. 'What beautiful emeralds!' Would she have liked to have them, and if that was the case, why didn't she buy them? Judging by the fact that she had a carriage, she must be a member of the wealthy upper class. In fact, I was pretty sure I had seen an aristocratic coat of arms on the side of the carriage. In the life of that woman, there must be some mystery.

Those were my thoughts, as I watched the carriage depart until I could no longer hear it. And I discovered that it was true; in her life, which seemed so quiet and gentle, there was in fact a horrible mystery. I won't tell you exactly how I did it, but I was finally able to discover what it was.

When she was quite young, she was forced to marry a disagreeable older man who, after squandering his own fortune, had searched for some sort of relationship that would give him the chance to do the same with someone else's. An exemplary wife and mother, that woman had done everything she could to preserve some part of her inheritance for her children, and to maintain the impression that her family was still at the same level of society where it had always been.

They talk about the sacrifices made by some women. Given her special circumstances, I don't think there is any way that one could compare her noble self-sacrifice, with the character of someone who is only interested in vanity and greed.

From the moment when, thanks to my efforts, I was finally able to solve the mystery of her existence, all of my aspirations were reduced to just one: to acquire that marvelous emerald necklace and find a way to give it to her so that she would accept it, and so that she would never know from whose hand it came.

I encountered many difficulties in my attempts to accomplish my goal, not the least of which was the necessity to find enough money to purchase the jewels.

Nevertheless, I was not going to give up my effort to find a solution. But I still did not know how I was going to find the money, and I thought of *A Thousand and One Nights*, the story with the magic words that were used to make the ground open and reveal a hidden treasure so large that just touching the stones caused them to pour out scores of rubies, topazes, pearls, and diamonds.

Not knowing what else to do, I decided to write a book and sell it. Getting money out of an editor can certainly be a miracle, but I accomplished it.

I wrote a very unusual book that was bought by few people, because only one person was able to appreciate it, while for others it was nothing more than a collection of words. I entitled it *A Necklace of Emeralds*, and I signed it with only my initials.

Since I am no Victor Hugo, and far from it, I don't need to tell you that they did not give me anywhere near what they gave someone like the author of *Our Lady of Paris*, but I still got enough for me to begin my plan of action.

The set of jewels I wanted to buy came to be worth about fourteen or fifteen thousand duros and, after selling the book, I was able to come up with the respectable quantity of three thousand reales. That meant that I would have to gamble in order to get the rest.

So I gambled, and I did it with such skill and such good fortune that, in just one night, I won more than enough to have what I needed.

With regard to gambling, I have learned something I have confirmed time after time. When you do it with the absolute certainty you are going to win, you win. You should never approach the card table with the attitude that you are going to test your luck, but with the conviction that you are only claiming what is yours. And that night, I can assure you that I would have been just as surprised to lose, as I would have been if they had told me that the Bank of Rothschild had no money.

So the next day I went back to Samper's Jewelry Shop. You may think that when I put the handful of colorful bills on the counter, bills that for me represented an entire year of entertainment, the company of beautiful women, a trip to Italy, lots of *champagne*, and all the cigars I wanted, that I hesitated for a moment. But you would be wrong. I put them there with the same composure with which the Duke of Buckingham broke the cord that bound him and dropped the pearls on the carpet in the palace of his beloved. And, of course, Buckingham was as powerful as a king.

So I bought the jewels and took them home. You cannot possibly imagine anything more beautiful than those emeralds. I am not surprised that a woman sighs with desire when she passes by one of these shops and sees such a tempting display of jewels. I am not surprised that Mephistopheles chose a necklace of precious stones as the object he used to seduce Margarita. I am just an ordinary man, but I would love to live in the Orient and be one of those kings who wears a crown of gold and jewels and adorn myself with magnificent strings of emeralds and brilliant flowers.

A gnome who wanted to earn the kiss of a sylph, with all of the immense treasure that he hides in the bosom of the earth, would not have been able to find any emerald that was more brilliant and more gorgeous than those in this necklace.

Now that I finally had the jewels, I began to think about how I might be able to give them to the woman for whom they were destined. A few days later, thanks to the money I had left after buying the emeralds, I got one of her servants to promise she would place them in her jewelry box without being seen. And to make sure that the source of the gift would be unknown, I gave her the rest of my money, a few thousand reales, on the condition that once she had placed the jewels in the agreed spot, she would leave Madrid and move to Barcelona. And, in fact, that is what she did.

You can just imagine the surprise of her mistress when, after the unexpected departure of her servant which made her suspect she might have stolen something from her home, she discovered the beautiful emerald necklace in her *secretaire*. Who would have ever expected something like this? And who would have thought she would remember the occasion when she had looked at those emeralds with a sigh?

Some time passed. I knew that she had my gift. I knew she had done everything she could to learn where it came from. However, I never saw her wear it. Did that mean that she scorned my gift? “Ah,” I thought to myself, “if she only knew how much effort had gone into this gift! If she only knew that it was worth more than the gift given by that lover when he pawned his cloak during the winter so he could buy a bouquet of flowers! Or perhaps she thinks it was given to her by some rich courtier who is going to come and demand payment for his gift. How badly mistaken she would be!”

One night when there was a dance, I went to take up a position outside the door of the palace and, lost in the crowd, I waited for her carriage to come so I could see her again. When it arrived and the lackey opened the door, she stepped out, just as beautiful as ever, causing a murmur of admiration to spread through the crowd of people. Women gazed at her with envy, and men looked at her with desire. And I uttered an involuntary cry... She was wearing the beautiful emerald necklace.

That night I went to bed without supper. I don't remember if it was because I had no appetite, or because I had no food to eat. But it didn't matter, because I was very happy. In my dreams I heard music and saw her dancing; she passed before my eyes and gave off sparks of many different colors. I think I even danced with her.

The affair of the emeralds had now become public and, after they were discovered in her *secretaire*, they became the topic of discussion among many fashionable women.

Once people found out about the mysterious way in which the emeralds had appeared, idle tongues began to gossip. Before this, the lady had always had a faultless reputation. In spite of her husband's bad behavior and the way he neglected her, no calumny was ever able to penetrate the shield of her virtues. However, many rumors were beginning to spread, according to what I heard from Don Basilio.

One day, when I was with a group of young men, they were discussing those emeralds, and one know-it-all acted like he knew everything about them:

“There is no need to rack your brains about it; those jewels have an origin that is just as ordinary as any gift given in this world. There are no longer any mysterious fairies who put fabulous presents under the pillows of beautiful women, and I am certain that a gift of this value is only given with the expectation of some recompense... And who knows if this recompense has not already been granted!...”

The words of that fool made me very angry; and I was even more angry that those who listened to him seemed to agree. Nevertheless, I held back. What right did I have to try to defend that woman?

However, a short time later the opportunity arrived for me to get even with the fellow who had insulted her. I don't know exactly how I did it, but I can tell you that it was with such harshness, as well as some rudeness, that after a few more words he challenged me to a duel. And that was just fine with me.

Knowing what kind of a person I am, my friends were surprised, not just because I had provoked a challenge for such a strange reason, but because I had also refused to give any explanation for my outburst.

So we fought, and I don't know whether it was good luck, or bad luck, but when I shot I saw my opponent fall flat on the the ground; then a moment later I heard some buzzing in my ears, and my eyes clouded. I was also wounded, wounded in the chest.

They carried me back to my room, suffering from a bad fever... I don't know how many days went by while I kept on calling for someone... For her, undoubtedly. I would have suffered in silence for the rest of my life if, on my death bed, I could have received an expression of gratitude from her. But to die without even leaving a memory!

These ideas were tormenting me one night, when I was still suffering from fever and couldn't sleep; I heard the door of my room open, and a woman appeared in the doorway. I thought I was dreaming, but no... The woman came over to my bed, the wretched bed where I was burning with fever, and as she lifted the veil covering her face, I saw a tear clinging to her long eyelashes... It was her!

I sat up with astonishment. I got out of bed, and... Well, that is when we reached the store of Durán...”

“Wait a minute...” I exclaimed, interrupting my friend. “Weren't you telling me that you were wounded and lying in bed?”

“Lying in bed!... Oh, darn it!... I forgot to explain, this is what I had been imagining ever since I was at the shop of Samper and I remembered what the woman had said when she saw those emeralds; then, after that we came to Durán's and saw Méry's book, *“Histoire de ce qui n'est pas arrivé (The story of something that has never happened)*. Now do you understand?”

When I heard this conclusion of his story, I could not contain my laughter. I don't know anything about the book by Méry, but now I can see that, with that title, you could write a million stories that would be quite entertaining.