

Jānis Poruks "Pērļu zvejnieks" [The Pearl Diver]

Excerpt

Translated by Terēze Svilane

Biography: Jānis Poruks (1871–1911) was born in Prēdeļi in Druviena parish (located in present-day Gulbene municipality). His father was the head of the parish and his family owned a farm. At the end of the century, he began to work intensively on his writing; however, 1904 was the year that marked the start of Poruks's decline. His daily routine was disrupted and he was suffering from a mental illness which led him to seek treatment at several psychiatric clinics until he died suddenly at Wladimir Tschisch's psychiatric clinic in Tartu. Poruks was one of the first to write in Latvian about Nietzsche's ideas. His book *Nākotnes reliģija* [Religion of the Future] focused on these ideas and was also published in German in Berlin. His novella *Perpetuum mobile* (1894) came about as a result of his studies on contemporary philosophical thought, and he is seen as having had an especially broad creative range compared with other Latvian writers. Poruks includes in his work concepts from Christianity to Nietzscheanism, from rich fantasy to the stark realities of everyday life. He wrote novels, short stories, novellas, poetry, and other works, and is considered to be one of the foundational figures of Latvian romantic prose. He also developed several Latvian literary archetypes: pure-hearted folk, "pearl divers", pale lads, and others.

Synopsis: *The Pearl Diver*, which the author described as fantasy, is one of the earliest long prose works by Poruks. Its main character, Ansis, is from the countryside and comes to Rīga to study. He is passionate; a dreamer and an idealist. For Ansis, "pearl diving" means fulfilling your life's goals: he wants to make his dreams come true, not just view them from a distance. But his life takes some difficult turns: his mother dies, he is unlucky in love, and he struggles with loneliness and, of course, the possibility that the world will never understand him. Ansis has no shortage of benefactors, including his mentor Talheims, his beloved Anna, and others. As the story progresses, Rīga comes to discover Ansis's unique nature and he begins to meet new people. The moral of the story is that every reader has to find the "pearls" in their own life (there is also a theory that Poruks used "pearls" to refer to the hearts of good people). The story is partially autobiographical and in it Poruks appears to foresee his own fate. This story also contains a motif that was completely new to Latvian

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long-form prose: Ansis discovers not only the physical path he must take on his journey, but also the path to find himself.

This and other works by Poruks are characterised by the words he wrote in a letter to his fiancée: "I was the first to include the concept of modern art in the Latvian national element." Literary specialist Viesturs Vecgrāvis compared *Pērļu zvejnieks* with Novalis's novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) and Ludwig Tieck's novel *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* (1796). Along with romantic elements, Poruks also weaves in reflections on the modern culture and philosophy of his time. This work is included in the Latvian Cultural Canon.

Excerpt:

When the springtide sun shines forth, when love rejoices with an elation beyond words in people's hearts as much as in the blue skies, then there is no time to question or to ponder why we exist or why the sun exists. Everything that has a soul sings in exultation together with him who has come to visit us in such a wonderfully delightful way...

Oh springtide, springtide, how indescribable you are! Your loveliness overcomes all heartache, we stand before you and do not understand what it is that you want, what is the meaning of your recurring return, we do not know why it is like that - as wise men and natural scientists explain to us the communication between earth and sun, we don't know why year after year passes by and yet something of the same remains and presides, we don't know it all but take pleasure, take sweet pleasure in everything that lovingly cleaves to our feelings. Our feelings welcome and greet all the companions of springtide as if they were old acquaintances of his. Strangers, incomprehensible, and yet so friendly and kind. Yes, the only life that raises us above the everyday is the one of the feelings – in the world it is they that have the deepest roots...

The curves of the Gauja river were adorning themselves ever more luxuriantly. Springtide gifted so much that the nightingales and other birds were unable to contain their joy on seeing it all, and loudly sang in exultation amidst the elders and the linden trees.

"Too much joy and gladness here in the world, does each and every one know how to appreciate it?" thought Ansis Vairogs, who, lying down on the grass at the side of the Gauja, had been daydreaming for a considerable length of time.

He dreamt like all those in their youth who love and are loved.

Once again, they – these inexplicable dreams of love – were troubling Ansis, the same dreams that had left someone else far away - disappointed and in tears. But Ansis Vairogs – he knew nothing at all of cunning and transiency, he did not know that these dreams fade; he did know, however, that springtide would depart as it always did, but as for love: that, it seemed to him, had sworn to be faithful for eternity.

Ansis was chewing on a blade of grass, he sat up and as if awoke; the sun had already gone down... He sleeked down his long blond hair, put on his woven straw hat and, rising quickly, he fixed his eyes on the east where a nearby pale-coloured church, with a green spire tinted by the scarlet light of evening, rose up high on the hill. Behind the church the blue sky was growing darker, while in the west, gently dreaming, low clouds gleamed in various shades of scarlet. Presently Ansis looked towards the north. At the edge of the forest there was a two-storey building – it was the courthouse of the parish, with the school alongside. The young man spent a moment in thought, walked a little way towards the school, stopped again and sank into a dreamlike gaze towards the west, yielding to the enjoyment of the scarlet glow. Or perhaps it was that he was thinking about his beloved Zenta?

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All of a sudden, Ansis awakens from his dreams once again... There is a ringing in the church tower. The eve of the holy day is announcing its approach. Ansis knows that it is she who is ringing there. He recognises this ringing: light, melodic, alternating in loudness. Zenta is ringing! To Ansis this makes the evening one of the holiest that could be. Ting, tang, ting, tang, ting, tang! How much more these pairs of sounds express than many a weighty tome, to Ansis they say everything, in them resounds the love of the beautiful Zenta. Peal after peal streams over Ansis' head, flowing far away, to become lost in the infinite silence of eternal distances...

The church bells had fallen silent long ago; the light of day, even the twilight glow of evening had long since faded into darkness. Ansis and Zenta stood in the church tower, resting their elbows on the window ledge. They were both gazing at the starry sky in silence.

"Let's go home, Zenta, it's now time!" Ansis took hold of Zenta's hand, encouraging her.

"Just wait until the moon rises..." Zenta begged, "I'm frightened to walk through the graveyard in the dark; I get frightened even when you are with me in any case, and here too, in the tower, I feel peculiar inside."

"It's a wonder," Ansis said, "how you and many others are overcome by fear at night in places where during the day they will gladly linger. You love to spend hour after hour in the graveyard or the tower, don't you, and you don't get frightened at all?"

"Yes, during the day, in the daylight it's completely different..." Zenta replied, thoroughly confused.

"Then, you know what, Zenta, it's either one or the other - you are either able to love me only during the day, or only at night! It could not be otherwise. Night or day, it

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makes no difference to me! I love to dream and neither one nor the other bothers my dreaming, except for people that I sometimes dislike..."

"Ansi, Ansi, what are you talking about! I love you day and night. But one thing is true: during the day I love you with gladness, yet at night I wake from sleep, think about you and don't know why my heart feels so heavy, as if constricted, I quite have to cry!"

"It's melancholia, melancholia!... You know enough German to understand that, Zenta! This melancholia has not passed me by either. It seems to me that melancholia enters into our hearts together with love, or perhaps they are one and the same thing? I don't know why we should love, Zenta? What do you think, how should our love end?"

"Well, just like all others: we shall keep on loving for as long as we have a heart in our breast... maybe, maybe - -"

"Maybe we will marry – you are thinking, dear Zenta. Yes, perhaps, but then again perhaps not. See, I like to dream, to ponder upon things, to admire beauty, and magnificence in nature and in people. But to meekly settle down for life, to be cooing forever as husband and wife – maybe that for me could be unbearable, you might become boring for me, we would start to live in discord, and to squabble. Zenta, what then would our love be! But now, are we not now living as if in paradise? We meet, we are silent together, we dream together and then part again! We hold sway over each other only where we are bound by love; otherwise when a husband rules over his wife – or vice versa – then sometimes there is a suppression of the individuality of hearts. But, Zenta, I don't know how to explain it all to you very well, you will be able to come to see this for yourself when you'll have given consideration to it all. What love wants, only she alone knows. She wears us out, she exhausts us eternally! Love is pain through happiness, sweet pain, but I respect it and hold it in high esteem, even more so because it remains faithful until our

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dying day. All other joys and pains may suffer change, they grow and wither away, love - never!"

"No, even at the graveside, Ansi, there too she attends to the flowers and weaves wreaths!" Tears glittered in Zenta's eyes. They both fell silent again and stared out through the window of the tower. Moonlight was now shining down over the white and the black crosses in the graveyard.

"See, Zenta, we will lie there – if not here, then in some other graveyard – and nobody will ever know that Ansis and Zenta had loved each other. Our hearts will no longer exist! Others will love, but I believe, I believe Zenta, that our love also is no mere trifle, she too has to be something, must express something special. And therefore she has to be eternal, nonetheless, because everything that can be expressed may perhaps become lost to itself, but it will never disappear from Him who created everything. Let us swear an oath to our faith here together, let us pray that He protects us, He who sent us into the world to love. Let us not be ashamed of one another, let us pray to the Almighty, both together, so that He himself would betroth us and bless our bonds!..."

Ansis sank to his knees, Zenta rested against his breast, weeping. They pressed against each other in tender love. Ansis gave a shiver... In the first kiss from Zenta's lips he was stirred by something deep, unfathomable. The moonlight shone on Zenta's cheek and a pair of tears like pearls escaped from her closed eyes.

"If only I knew how to keep these pearls!" whispered Ansis.

Zenta suddenly started. "Now let's go... It's so light... Moonlight!..."

Still clutching Ansis' hand, Zenta slowly descended the narrow stairs ahead of him, moonlight occasionally illuminating the stairs through the tiny windows of the tower. Both

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of them felt strangely moved, their hearts aflutter. At the large entrance doors of the church

Ansis stopped and stared at the altar. The moon was also peering there inquisitively.

"Yes, to love in a godlike way is probably something else," Ansis whispered - the picture of the one on the cross moved him to the depths of his heart. "Yes, to love divinely, Zenta, that is something we are unable to do..."

Zenta timorously looked around over the church pews. "Let's go, I feel heavy of heart here," she pleaded. Ansis obeyed. They left the church and Zenta locked the door. Slow footsteps sounded on the stone paved courtyard of God's house. A tiny path led through the graveyard to the school. They walked along it in silence. At the side of the path shone a white marble cross. Ansis bent down and read: *Der Liebe hört nimmer auf* – 'Love never ends'. A loner rested here, a solitary old gentleman from Germany who a few years ago had been the manor steward here. While leading Zenta by the hand, Ansis contemplated how no-one dares to be so bold as a human being. 'Love never ends!' He, too, had profoundly felt the same. Even this lone manor steward had loved someone and had remained faithful to her until his death. Perhaps also belief, a supernatural consciousness that someone had loved him as well, but had not, for worldly reasons, been able to draw closer to him. Ansis pondered over it, this way and that...

The potions / revels of the night soon made Ansis and Zenta drowsy. Both of them lived in the same house. Zenta, sister of the schoolteacher at one end, Ansis, son of the parish clerk at the other. Both the schoolteacher Mr Zeltiņš and his father, who was a sexton, were not inclined towards any friendship with that old prankster, the clerk Vairogs. Now they were all fast asleep in sweet repose.

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Zenta was already far away in the land of dreams while Ansis was still in a wakeful reverie. The old clock on the wall ticked away unflagging. The faint light of morning was already dawning by the time Ansis fell asleep.

2

A Sunday morning in the month of May – how quiet and full of holiness it can be! You walk through the meadows alongside the River Gauja, when in the morning the sun smiles and in the evenings white, wispy little clouds float in the sky; you go there and once again become convinced that surely there is someone who likes to make the world dream from the heavens. The delight of the Sabbath! Who would be able to express you and describe you? The leaves of the linden, the ash and the other trees, ruffled now and then by a zephyr, stop, are quiet for an instant, all listening to each other, and everything is silent... An old man with a shiny shaven face and silvery white hair is on his way to church; he, too, stops and listens. Indefinable, elevated feelings overwhelm his heart. These feelings that are awakened within his soul by the lovely Sunday morning are not unfamiliar to him, they are similar to those that surged through his breast when he, reading the sermon of Good Friday, perceived in spirit their wonder and power. Magnificent suffering and pain!... And they are succeeded by this sweet delight in which everything bursts into flower and flourishes as if transfigured! Even the earth, having endured winter, reaches this wonderfulness, this quiet which brings us so close to heaven; it is that heart that feels it best... Little butterflies, patterned in myriads of ways, are fluttering around, playing with the crowns of the flowers. It is ringing in the church tower! Not Zenta, but her father, old Zeltiņš, is pulling on the bell ropes today. How strange these sounds, so unlike last night! Zenta is already sitting in the

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church, in the front pew nearest the altar. From time to time she casts a surreptitious glance towards the men's side of the choir but Ansis has not arrived yet...

Old Vairogs is sitting on the stone steps of the parish house. There is a small but burgeoning flower garden in front of him. His wife is sickly and religious – very God-fearing. She has not planted a single flower yet. It is all old Vairogs' very own achievement. And now he is enjoying it for himself, his kindly, rotund face smiling. He loves to sit down like this, to light up a cigar and reflect a while. He loves songs and it is because of this in particular that he regularly attends church. He knows all the organ preludes from memory, that is why he always sits next to the organist, Zenta's brother Jānis Zeltiņš. Otherwise he does not get along with him that well, but he admires Zeltiņš' playing. On Sunday afternoons, when there is singing in the Zeltiņšes household at the other end of the house, then old Vairogs comes along, albeit sometimes a little late, to sing with the basses, for the most part. He does not have a proper bass voice but he still regards himself as a fairly good singer, and is always offering a word of advice to the youngsters as to how loudly they should be singing, and how long they should hold this note or another.

"Hmmm, old Zeltiņš is already tinging!" Vairogs pulls out from his pocket a watch and, having carefully wiped it with his handkerchief, puts it back into his pocket. "Time to go to church."

He rises to his feet awkwardly and pats down his hair with his hands – a mannerism common to both the old and the young Vairogs.

"Who knows whether Ansis has got up, must go and take a look, just in case."

The portly clerk indolently saunters into the room...

"Ansi, little chick, this is a bit too much! The time is half past eight, and you're still in your burrow? Tell me, my good fellow – what are you really doing nights? Could it be that

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you've learnt to drink? Show me your wallet!" Old Vairogs takes out a knitted purse from the pocket of Ansis' trousers and counts out the money...

"It's all there – your cash situation is in good order! But tell me, why do you spend these lovely summer mornings sleeping... In winter you are the first to get up, you traipse around all over the house and make noise!" The old man sits down on the edge of his son's bed and draws back the blanket that Ansis had pulled over his head. Ansis opens his eyes wide, almost smiles, then closes his eyes again and yawns.

"Is it already too late?"

"Oh, oh, how that love torments people! Zenta has been at church for ages, Ansis still in bed. Old Zeltiņš will never let you have his daughter!"

"Father, have you been at the punch? How come you're so cheerful! But you know, even when drunk you shouldn't make fun of me!"

"My head is indeed spinning, Ansi! Outside, the scent of the flowers is so strong! It's an uncommonly beautiful morning! We'll be drinking punch in the afternoon. We have guests coming today. The innkeeper of Leja together with his wife, son and daughter, and the lord of the manor and his lady."

"And that's all!"

"You're thinking of the Zeltiņšes! Well, you meet up with Zenta every day. If you wish, I could, while pressing on the pedals of the organ, whisper a few sweet words into Zeltiņš' ear. Old Zeltiņš is a devout man, but I do think he would not pass up an opportunity for some hot punch. The man serving at the church tavern told me that this old chap had even bought some black balsam there once. That's really too much, such a devout man and he drinks black balsam!"

"But black balsam is an excellent medicine for the stomach."

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"Yes, everything that we imbibe is medicine for the stomach, but it is possible to overdose. Especially someone like old Zeltiņš, who only drinks water from the Gauja river. But enough of that! Get up, Ansi, get up! Let's go to church!..."

Old Vairogs rose to his feet, went over to the window and, while watching the main road along which the churchgoers were driving and walking, he hummed to himself the bass line to some chorale. Meanwhile Ansis quickly washed and got dressed.

3

Members of the congregation were already starting to emerge. A christening party and a wedding party were standing close by the church door, waiting with cheery faces until they had finished singing *Oh come Heavenly Father* inside. A little old lady who had fainted was carried out. The weather had turned hot. The sun was scorching. Fence posts appeared to be quivering because the air all around was vibrating in a shimmery haze.

Ansis stood opposite the door of the church, leaning against the wall of the churchyard building. He was watching for Zenta who would be coming out soon; in the meanwhile, he remembered all that had happened in the church tower the previous night. Indeed – during the day it was a different love, different feelings when there were so many people milling around, making noise, when the sun was shining and the birds singing. It is a different love – that of the day and that of the night.

"Is it one and the same?" Ansis wondered to himself. He would have pursued that thought, but look, there was Zenta, she had appeared at the door of the church. She was gazing upwards at the sun... as if lost and she did not know in which direction she should go. Ansis walked over to greet her.

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"Good morning, Zenta!"

"Good morning!"

They went to one side. Ansis sat down on a moss-covered grave that had caved in long ago, it no longer even had its cross. Zenta handed to him a gilded hymn book, she then unfolded a scarf that she had concealed under her arm and tied it over her head.

"Zenta, would you not like to visit us at our home today? My father is expecting guests."

"To tell the truth, Ansi, for me it would be more pleasant to meet up with you on your own. At social gatherings it's as if I'm dim-witted and dull, there's no merriment to be found with me whatsoever. Besides, there will be singing at our place. However, if my father is going then I'll come with him."

"Come on, Zenta, you could come merely out of curiosity alone. It's not good to be dreaming all the time. You need a little gaiety!"

"What other guests are going to be there?"

"The Leja innkeeper and his family, the lord of the manor and his lady, probably no-one else."

"The innkeeper from Leja! And his son Artūrs, that rascal who kept on pestering me at the open-air dance last summer - I saw him at church... That would be an unpleasant encounter."

"Never mind about that, Zenta. Artūrs is now attending gymnasium and has the fine manners of a town dweller, he will have learnt to behave politely. At the parish school we used to be friends. It's just that his father gives him too much money and that spoils him, otherwise by nature he has quite a kind heart."

"But I loathe him, I don't quite know why."

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"It's because you're from the Zeltiņš family. The Zeltiņšes are all serious people, and it's difficult to please those who are serious. Is it not so?"

Ansis handed the hymn book back to Zenta. Both walked off towards the school along the same graveyard path as yesterday. Old Vairogs, chatting with some elderly men by the graveyard fence, unconsciously followed the youngsters with his gaze.

"Not bad, a handsome couple?" he thought. "But what is the good of that – neither has that foundation on which they could start to conduct lives of their own. But they are still too young, anyway..."

A good-looking young man, dressed in town fashion, scarcely more than a boy, was creeping through the pine trees of the graveyard behind Ansis and Zenta, following them.

"This virtuous young man still clasps Zenta around the waistline in his mind and carries her across a stream that even a child could leap over. There's something shady there! Ansi, my little Ansi! You're too much of a fool to make love! I'll still be able to run rings around you, even though you think so hard and so much... This Zenta, I'll never forget her words from last summer. Zenta, be on your guard!"

He pulled a horrible face but it soon cleared. The one who thought like that, and, having lit up a cigarette, turned around to go back towards the church, was Artūrs Birķis, the son of the innkeeper of Leja.

"Here's to the hostess of the house!" cried out the Leja innkeeper, tipsy from the punch, as he clinked glasses with old Zeltiņš and the lord of the manor Tahlheim, the latter also toasted best wishes to Vairogs' wife, except that instead of the word 'hostess' he used

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the word 'lady'. Mrs Vairogs was sitting in an old-fashioned armchair at the end of the table, face screwed up, wrinkled forehead and cheeks, a knitted woollen shawl around her shoulders. Already at first glance it was evident that she was in poor health and had forsaken merrymaking. Only her beautifully sparkling eyes still held something special and attractive. They were the same eyes that, when reinvigorated and united with masculinity in Ansis, the young Vairogs, observed life and nature with a searching gaze. Anna, Mrs Vairogs, expressed her thanks, for one brief instant almost smiling, and then sank back into her lonely dreamworld. Only now and then she would cast a glance in the direction of Ansis who, half the time with the guests, half the time gazing outside through the window, was distracted by nature.

"Are they really genuine pearls?" Lady Tahlheim was asking the Leja innkeeper, whose daughter Bertha was proudly showing off a splendid necklace.

"I should think so, indeed!" the innkeeper boasted. "It's like this. I'd gone down to Riga. I was visiting my brother-in-law who's a goldsmith. I wanted to give something as a gift to my dear Bertha, something of gold or even more expensive. My brother-in-law offered me this piece of jewellery, he charged me for only half the actual value of the piece, and the other half he presented as a gift to his goddaughter. My brother-in-law said that a single one of these pearls would cost fifteen roubles..."

"Outrageous extravagance!" old Zeltiņš growled to himself, humped in an armchair, eyes flickering rapidly in pleasure whenever there was talk of money.

Bertha Birķis, whose prettiness of face and stateliness of figure could not be denied, made a curiously sulky face and stared condescendingly at Zenta who, deep in thought, was plucking at a corner of her scarf. Old Vairogs – in a waistcoat and snow-white shirt with

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puffed up sleeves, had worked up a sweat as he, together with a servant girl, handed out snacks and drinks.

"They cannot be real pearls, surely!" Lady Tahlheim whispered in her husband's ear while Vairogs was at the other end of the table, pouring boiling water into the Birkises glasses.

"What do I know of pearls!" Tahlheim growled by way of reply, as he spread a thick layer of butter on a slice of white bread.

"Once upon a time they had found pearls here too, in the river," Vairogs remarked as he put down the kettle. "My father often spoke about it. You, old father Zeltiņš, might remember?"

"Naturally, naturally! I myself have seen these pearls. Some gypsies wanted to sell some to me but I didn't buy them, you can get swindled. It could happen that they weren't pearls at all."

Ansis turned his head away from the window and listened attentively...

"Well, this kind of talk wouldn't have come from nowhere, either. My father never lied. He was acquainted with the gamekeeper who used to fish for the pearls right here in our riverbends at night; in winter he'd take them to the city and sell them for a lot of money. Though it was not every year that they were there. This gamekeeper had become rich on it..."

Ansis' eyes shone and lit up all the more brightly when he heard the story about the pearls. Could it really be true that right here, nearby, there were pearls growing in the river?...

The guests rose from the table and dispersed into twos and threes, some went outside to take in the pleasant evening. Zenta hurried off to the other end of the building.

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Her brother had asked her to sing in a song where she would have to perform a difficult solo part. Ansis went over to the window and drummed on the windowpanes with his fingers.

"And you're not planning to enrol at the gymnasium?" Someone grasped him by the shoulder. He turned around to see who it was. Artūrs Birķis was standing in front of him.

"No, I don't have the means. You know that my mother has been ailing. She doesn't want any money to be spent for her sake. But what can you do! Doctors don't come for free. Last summer, while at the seaside, she spent a great deal of money. Though not much good came of it. But because of my dear Mama I gave up any thoughts of going to the gymnasium. I work for my father as his assistant. I work and I'm happy."

"Happy! Happy, maybe! But this small pittance is quickly depleted if a person has not studied anything. You must go to the city, you'll struggle through whichever way you can, you won't be the only Latvian who's been destined to reach his goal in spite of overwhelming difficulties. To Riga, brother! At the gymnasium they teach you to recognise and respect a different kind of fortune..."

There was a sly gleam to Artūrs' eyes. He could see that his words had left a huge impression on Ansis...

Late that night, when all the guests had departed and old Vairogs and his wife had gone to bed, Ansis stood on the stairs staring in the direction of the Gauja...

"Pearl fishing! ... Perhaps that might make it possible for me to attend some higher hall of learning..." Tonight once again it was late before he finally fell asleep

"What dangers those Ceylonese pearl fishermen have to overcome!" Ansis thought while taking his shoes and socks off on the banks of the Gauja, and gave a wry smile. "Here I

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am not in peril of any kind of misfortune, except for the fact that I may not find any pearls at all..."

He would have nevertheless willingly gone through the same dangers as real pearl fishermen if he had known that the undertaking was not a foolish one. To fish for pearls in the River Gauja – that seemed to him completely laughable! But he had to find out - who knows, it could happen that he really might find some pearls there!