

The Falcon¹
by Giovanni Boccaccio

There was once a young man in Florence named Federigo, the son of Filippo Alberighi, who was more famous for his bravery and courtly manners than any other bachelor in Tuscany. As was the case with most gentlemen, Federigo fell in love Madam Giovanna, who in her day was one of the loveliest and liveliest noble ladies in Florence. To win her love, he held jousts and tournaments, hosted great feasts, gave gifts, and spent his wealth without restraint. But Madam Giovanna, who was no less virtuous than beautiful, thought nothing of his show of love or even for him that showed it. As a result, his wealth eventually came to an end and he became poor, having nothing left but a poor little farm, and was forced to live on the living he got from it, which was very small. The second possession left to him was a falcon—one of the best in the world. So, as his zealous love was unrequited, and he could no longer appear the dashing young wealthy bachelor as he wanted to, he took up his residence at Campi, where his farm was, and there bore his poverty with patience, busy with his falconry, and asking help of no one.

In the meantime, Madame Giovanni married, but it happened one day that her husband fell sick and seeing that his life was near its end, made out his will. Being very rich, he made his son his heir and arranged it so that if his son should die without any children, his beloved Madam Giovanna would become the heir. Shortly after he made out his will, this wealthy noble died.

That summer the widowed lady left for the country with her son to an estate of hers that was very near that of Federigo. It so happened that her son became acquainted with Federigo and fell in love with his hawks and hounds. He often watched his falcon flying and was strangely taken with it. He desired to have it for his own, but didn't dare ask, seeing that it was so dear to him.

It came to pass that the boy fell sick. Anxious about her darling son, Madame Giovanna stayed by his side all day, comforting him without rest. Many times she asked him if there was anything he

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wanted—anything—, and if it was in her power to get it, she would find a way for him to have it. She repeated these offers many times, and eventually the boy said, “Oh, Mother, if you could somehow let me have Federigo’s falcon, I think I would get well again.”

When the lady heard this, she mused for a moment and thought how she could accomplish his request. She knew that Federigo had long loved her, even though she never even deigned to give him the satisfaction of knowing that she noticed him. And she knew she could get the bird from him if she but asked for it. But she said within herself, “How will I be able to ask him for this falcon, which is, by all that I hear, the finest of its kind, and provides game for him to eat? And how can I be so graceless as to ask him to give it to me when he has nothing else besides?”

She became completely perplexed. Not knowing what to say to her son, she said nothing. However, at last, her love for the boy so got the better of her that she then and there determined to do what he asked her, whatever might come of it. She decided that she would go herself to ask for the falcon. “My son,” she at last said to the boy, “Rest well. I promise you that the first thing I do tomorrow morning is to get you that falcon. You just think about getting well again.” The boy’s face brightened and his condition seemed to improve that same day.

Taking another lady with her, Madame Giovanni went to Federigo’s little home on the following morning. She inquired for the master of the house, who was then in his garden supervising the work being done there, as the weather was not conducive to hawking, nor had been for the past several days. When he heard that Madam Giovanna had asked for him at the door, he ran to the house with a joyful heart. She saw him come, rose and went graciously to meet him. She greeted him respectfully. “Good day, Federigo!” she said. “I’ve come to make up for all that you have suffered because of me, in loving me more than you should have. I want to make it up to you by dining with you as a friend—you, me and my companion.”

“Madam,” Federigo answered humbly, “I don’t recall any offense on your part. On the contrary, I remember only good. If ever I was worth anything, it came about because of you and the love I had for you. You have come to a poor host, but your gracious visit is surely far

more precious to me than it would be if I were able to spend over again as much as that which I have spent before.”

Having said that, he humbly took her into his house and into his garden, where, having no one else to stay with her, he said, “Madam, since there is no one else here, this good woman, the wife of a neighboring farmer, will keep you company, while I see to it that the table is set.”

Federigo was a very poor man. But never till that moment, had he been so sadly sensible of the straits to which he had brought on himself by spending all his riches so unwisely. That morning he searched his pantry to serve something for the noble lady—for love of whom he had previously held great feasts with numerous guests—but found nothing. Aware of his situation, he ran here and there in great confusion, like a man beside himself, inwardly cursing his ill fortune. But all his frenzied activity produced nothing. He found no food, no money to buy it with, nor even any possession to pawn.

It was now growing late. What could he serve the lady? In desperation, his eye fell on his good falcon, which he saw on his perch in the little parlor. With no other food to serve, he took the bird and finding him fat, thought that he would make a meal worthy of his beloved. Without any further ado, he wrung the hawk’s neck and immediately asked a little maid servant of his to pluck and truss it and put it on the spit and roast it. The table was then laid and covered with clean white cloths, which he still had in store. With a cheerful face he returned to the lady in the garden and told her that dinner was ready, such as it was in his power to provide. The lady and her friend arose, seated themselves at the table, while Federigo eagerly waited on them. The ladies then dined on the good falcon, not knowing what it was they were eating.

When the meal was finished, Madam Giovanni and her companion rose from the table, and for a few moments exchanged a few pleasant words with Federigo. The noble lady then thought it time to tell why she had come. She turned to her good host and politely said, “Federigo, I do not doubt that when you hear why I really came to visit, you will be shocked at my presumption. Politeness and good breeding forbids me to tell you. But if you had children, you would

understand. You would excuse me for the love I have for my only son. So I will now tell you. I came for a favor. I beg of you to give me your falcon, which my boy loves with all his heart. If I don't bring it back to him, I am afraid that his present illness will worsen and I will lose him. So I make my request, not by the love you have for me—for you owe me nothing in that regard—, but by reason of your own noble heart. Would you give it to me? If you would be so gracious, I may keep my son alive, and by doing so, make him a debtor to you forever.”

Federigo listened intently to the lady's request. And when she stopped, he began weeping in her presence before he could answer a word, as he knew that he could not oblige her because he had given her the falcon to eat. At first the lady believed that his tears arose from the grief at having to part from his good falcon and that his tears meant that he would not grant her request. However, she contained herself and waited for Federigo's reply.

After weeping awhile, he answered her. “Madam,” he said, “ever since I set my love on you, I have complained about my past bad fortune, but it is nothing in comparison with what I must complain of now. You never deigned to come to me while I was rich, but you have come here now that I am poor, and though you ask of me but a little favor, Lady Fortune has so designed it that I cannot honor your request. And let me tell you briefly why I cannot. When I heard that you wanted to dine with me, I thought it was a small and seemly thing to honor you as much as I could. I then remembered the falcon which you formerly praised, and I thought that he would make a most fitting meal for a noble lady such as you. This very morning, then, I served the falcon roasted on a plate, which you have just eaten. I thought I had acted nobly and well, but it now grieves me to know that you wanted the falcon for a different purpose and that I cannot honor your request. I will never forgive myself. He then produced evidence of what he had done and put before her the falcon's feathers, feet and beak.

When the lady heard his story and saw what he had done, she at first blamed him for killing such a fine bird to provide a meal for her; however, inwardly she praised his generosity which his poverty had not in any way diminished. With no hope of getting the falcon for her

son, and doubting that he would ever recover, Madame Giovanni then departed with her companion all disconsolate and returned to her son who, to her inexpressible grief, shortly afterwards died, either from disappointment at not getting the bird or from the disease that afflicted him. She mourned her loss greatly.

The brothers of the noble lady more than once urged her to marry again, as she was now very rich and still young. But she was unwilling to do so. When they persisted in their exhortations, she called to mind Federigo's worth and his last act of generosity—that is, killing such a fine falcon to please her. She then said to them, "I would gladly stay single as I am, but since you urge me to take a second husband, I will not marry any other man except Federigo degli Alberighi."

Her brothers mocked her, and said, "You silly woman, what are you saying? How can you choose him? He is but a poor man with nothing in the world to call his own."

She answered her brothers, "I know very well that what you say is true. But I would rather marry a good man with no money than marry money with no good man."

Her brothers heard what she had to say. They knew Federigo was a man of great merit, even though he was quite poor. They therefore gave her, with all her wealth, to him, as was her desire. The two were then married. Federigo became more frugal with his money than he was before, all because of his love for his noble lady, and ended his days with her in solace and joy.