

Day 5, Story 9

In love with a lady who does not return his affection, Federigo degli Alberighi consumes his fortune, spending it all on courting her, until the only thing he has left is a single falcon. When she comes to call on him at his house, he serves it to her to eat because he has nothing else to offer her. Upon discovering what he has done, she has a change of heart, takes him as her husband, and makes him a rich man.¹

Once Filomena had stopped speaking, the Queen saw that no one else was left except for Dioneo, who had his privilege, and so she said, with a cheerful expression on her face:

Since it is now my turn to speak, dearest ladies, I shall do so gladly and shall tell you a story that partly resembles the preceding one. I do not do so just to make you realize what an effect your charms have on noble hearts, but to teach you how you should, when it is fitting, decide for yourselves how to bestow your favors rather than always allowing Fortune to direct you, for she, as it happens, almost always distributes her gifts with more abundance than discretion.

You should know, then, that Coppo di Borghese Domenichi, who used to live in our city, and perhaps lives there still, was one of the most distinguished and highly respected men of our times, an illustrious person who deserved eternal fame more because of his character and abilities than his noble lineage.² When he was well advanced in years, he often derived great pleasure from talking with his neighbors, and with others as well, about incidents from the past. In this he excelled other men, for he had a good sense of how to order things, possessed a capacious memory, and was quite eloquent. Among his many fine stories, there was one he used to tell about a young man who once lived

in Florence named Federigo, the son of Messer Filippo Alberighi, who for feats of arms and courtly manners was more highly spoken of than any other squire in Tuscany.³

As often happens with gentlemen, Federigo fell in love with a noble lady named Monna Giovanna, who was in her time considered to be one of the most beautiful and refined women in Florence. In an attempt to earn her love, he participated in jousts and tournaments, held banquets, lavished gifts on people, and spent his wealth without restraint. She, however, who was no less honest than beautiful, took no notice of either the things that were done for her or the person who did them.

As Federigo continued to spend money well beyond his means, while acquiring nothing from his lady in return, he went through his entire fortune, as can easily happen, and wound up a poor man, left with nothing except a tiny little farm, the income from which was just enough for him to live very frugally, and a single falcon, which was among the finest in the world. More in love with the lady than ever, but knowing that he could no longer live in the city in the style he preferred, he moved out to Campi where his little farm was located.⁴ There he would go hunting with his falcon whenever he could, and without asking assistance from anyone, he bore his poverty with patience.

One day, while Federigo was living in these extremely straitened circumstances, Monna Giovanna's husband, who was very rich, happened to fall ill, and seeing death approach, drew up his will. In it he left his entire estate to his son, who was still a growing boy, and since he also loved his wife very dearly, he made her his heir in the case that his son should die without lawful issue. Then, shortly after that, he passed away.

Monna Giovanna was left a widow, and as our women normally do every year, she went to the country during the summer, taking her son with her to an estate of theirs not far from Federigo's farm. Consequently, the little boy happened to strike up a friendship with Federigo and developed a passionate interest in birds and dogs. He had often seen Federigo's falcon in flight and was so taken with it that he longed to have it for his own, but since he realized how dear it was to Federigo, he never dared to ask him for it.

So things stood, when, to his mother's deep distress, the boy happened to fall ill. Since he was her only child and she loved him as much as one possibly could, she hovered about him all day long, never ceasing to comfort him. Every so often she asked him if there was anything he wanted, imploring him to tell her, because if it was possible to acquire it, she would see about getting it for him.

Finally, after hearing her make this offer over and over again, the boy said: "Mother, if you could arrange for me to have Federigo's falcon, I think I'd soon get better."

When she heard his request, the lady pondered it a great while as she tried to figure out what she should do in response. Knowing that Federigo had been in love with her for a long time and had not received even a single passing glance from her, she said to herself: "How can I send someone to him, let alone go there myself and ask him for his falcon, which is, from everything I've heard, the finest that ever flew, and more than that, the only thing keeping him alive? How can I be so insensitive as to want to deprive such a noble man of his one remaining pleasure?"

Stuck in this quandary, she remained silent, not knowing what to say in answer to her son's request, even though she was certain the falcon was hers for the asking. Finally, however, her love for her son got the better of her, and she decided to satisfy him, come what may, not by sending someone for the falcon, but by going there herself to get it and bring it back to him. "Cheer up, my son," she said, "and just think about getting better. I promise you I'll go to fetch it first thing in the morning, and I'll bring it back here to you for sure." The boy was overjoyed, and that very same day, began showing signs of improvement.

The next morning, taking another woman along with her as company, the lady went over to Federigo's little cottage and asked for him just as though it was nothing more than a casual visit. Since the weather had not been right for hawking for several days, Federigo was in his kitchen garden taking care of one or two little chores, but the moment he heard, to his utter astonishment, that Monna Giovanna was at the door and wanted to see him, he was so happy that he ran there at once to meet her.

When she saw him coming, she got up to meet him with womanly grace. After receiving his respectful greeting, she said, "I hope you are well, Federigo." Then she continued: "I have come to make amends for the harm you have suffered on my account in loving me more than you should have. What I offer you by way of compensation is that I and my companion should like to have a simple dinner here at home with you this morning."

"My lady," replied Federigo in all humility, "I cannot recall ever having suffered any harm on account of you. On the contrary, I have received so much good that if I have ever proved myself worthy in any way, it was entirely due to your merit and to the love I bore you. Moreover, let me assure you that this visit, which is such a generous gesture on your part, is even more precious to me than it would be if I were once again able to spend as much as I have in the past, although on this occasion you have come to a very poor host indeed."

When he finished speaking, he humbly welcomed her into his house and from there led her into his garden, where, not having anyone to keep her company, he said: "My lady, since there is no one else available, this good woman, who is the wife of this farmhand here, will keep you company, while I go to see about having the table set."

Although his poverty was dire, until then Federigo had not realized how desperately needy he had made himself by squandering all his wealth. That morning, however, when he discovered that he had nothing with which he could honor the lady, for whose love he had entertained countless people in the past, he was forced to realize just what it was that he had done. Distressed beyond measure, he silently cursed his fortune, as he ran here and there like a man out of his senses, but he had no success in finding either money or something to pawn. It was already late in the morning, and he was still determined to honor the noble lady with a meal of some sort without asking for assistance from his own farmhand, let alone anyone else, when his eye happened to fall upon his precious falcon sitting on its perch in the little room where he kept it. Since he had no other recourse, he seized the bird, and finding it nice and plump, decided it would make a worthy dish for such a lady. So, without giving the matter a second thought, he wrung its neck and

promptly gave it to a maidservant to be plucked, dressed, and carefully roasted on a spit. Then, when the table was laid with the whitest linen—for he still had some of that in his possession—he returned to the lady in the garden and with a smile on his face told her that their dinner, such as he could prepare for her, was ready.

The lady and her companion arose and came to the table. Then, together with Federigo, who served them with the greatest devotion, they ate the fine falcon without knowing what it was they were eating.

After they had finished dining and the two women had chatted pleasantly with Federigo for a while, the lady felt it was the right time to tell him her reason for coming. Thus, in an affable manner, she began speaking to him:

“Federigo, I haven’t the slightest doubt but that you are going to marvel at my presumption when you hear the principal reason for my coming here, especially when you recall your past life and my honesty, which you may have interpreted as harshness and cruelty. But if you had children, or if you had ever had any, you would recognize just how powerful the love one bears for them can be, and on that account, I feel certain you would, to some extent, forgive me.

“Although you have no children, I, who do have a son, am not exempt from the laws common to all other mothers, and since I have no choice but to obey them, I am forced, against my will and contrary to all the rules of decency and decorum, to ask you to make me a gift of something to which I know you are deeply attached—and with good reason, for it is the only delight, the only recreation, the only consolation left you after the loss of your entire fortune. And that gift is your falcon, for which my son has such a longing that if I do not bring it back to him, I fear his sickness is going to get so much worse that I might well lose him. And therefore, not because of the love you bear me, which places you under no obligation to me, but because of your nobility, by which you have shown yourself superior to everyone else in performing acts of courtesy, I implore you to be so kind as to give it to me so that I may be able to say I have preserved my son’s life by means of this gift and have thereby placed him forever in your debt.”

When he heard what the lady wanted from him and realized that

there was no way for him to be of service to her because he had given her the falcon to eat, Federigo began weeping in her presence before he could so much as utter a word in reply. The lady at first believed his tears arose more from his grief over having to part with his prized falcon than from any other motive, and she was on the point of telling him she no longer wanted it. She held herself back, however, and waited to see how Federigo would respond once he stopped crying.

“My lady,” he said, “ever since it pleased God that I should make you the object of my love, I have repeatedly complained that Fortune has been my enemy, but everything she did is trivial in comparison with what she has done to me just now. Nor shall I ever be able to forgive her, for I cannot help thinking of how you have come here to my poor house, which you never deigned to visit when it was rich, and how you want only a trifling gift from me, but she has arranged things so that I cannot give it to you. Why I cannot do so, I will explain to you in just a few words.

“When you did me the kindness of saying you wished to dine with me, I deemed it right and proper, in consideration of your distinction and your merit, to honor you by doing all I could to provide you with choicer fare than that which I generally serve other people. Calling to mind the excellence of the falcon you asked me for, I decided it would make a worthy dish for you, and so, this morning I had it roasted and served to you on a trencher, which was, I thought, the best way to present it. But now, I realize that you wanted to have it in a different sense, and I am so distressed by my inability to be of service to you that I do not believe I shall ever forgive myself.”

After he finished speaking, he had the feathers, the talons, and the beak placed before her as evidence. On seeing and hearing all this, although the lady initially reproached him for having killed such a falcon simply in order to feed a woman, she then began commending him to herself and was soon filled with admiration for his magnanimity, which his poverty had not been able to diminish, nor ever would. Now, however, that she could not hope to obtain the falcon, she feared that her son's health was therefore in jeopardy, and so, after thanking Federigo for both his hospitality and his good intentions, she took her

leave of him, utterly despondent, and returned to her child. To the immeasurable grief of his mother, in the space of a few days, whether it was the result of his depression because he could not have the falcon, or simply the case that his illness would have inevitably led him to such a pass, the boy departed from this life.

After a period of bitter mourning and endless tears, the lady was urged by her brothers on more than one occasion to remarry, since she had been left very rich and was still a young woman. Although she would have preferred to remain a widow, they importuned her so insistently that finally, recalling Federigo's great worth and his last act of generosity, that is, his having killed such a splendid falcon in her honor, she said to them: "I would gladly abstain from marriage, if only that would please you, but since you really want me to choose a husband, you may be certain that I shall never take any man other than Federigo degli Alberighi."

"What are you saying, you silly woman?" said her brothers, making fun of her. "How can you want someone who doesn't have a thing in the world?"

"My brothers," she replied, "I am well aware of the truth of what you're saying, but I'd rather have a man without riches than riches without a man."

Seeing that her mind was made up and knowing Federigo to be a very worthy gentleman, despite his poverty, the brothers acceded to her wishes and gave her to him, together with all her wealth. And so, Federigo, finding himself not just married to the great lady he had loved so dearly, but a very rich man to boot, managed his fortune more prudently than he had before and lived with her happily to the end of his days.