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Flight of the Falcon

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A strong east wind drove lead-grey clouds, like canvas sails, across the wide Rhine valley, herding them into a small anchorage almost under the wooded hills in the west. The hills seemed to shiver from the cold, as though they might flow into the lowland and dissolve; but it was only the force of the wind that made the trees bend and sway.

The ground was soft and loamy. Wet-brown earth clogged the heel cleats of the man and boy, and the sharp wheat-stubbles bent unwillingly under their crushing soles. The whole earth smelled of moisture and rotting green, of summer gone, and barns filled.

The man, walking two steps ahead of the boy, was dressed in the loden worn by old woodsmen. Yet he was not an old man, and his moss-green felt hat shaded an aquiline face on which the tanned skin stretched across jutting cheek bones. His lips were only a cut in the high slope of his chin, and his eyes, set closely together, gave him an eager, almost animal look. And his were far-ranging eyes that constantly scanned the saw-edge of the distant woods, and the foaming sky overhead.

On a gloved fist — his left — squatted the falcon, sleek, clean, indifferent. Now and then the bluish beak reached through the leather hood, out and down, and pulled on the glove, brown and smelling of dried blood and rotten meat. Sometimes, when the jarring forward motion of the man threatened to throw her off balance the bird shook her plumage, earth-colored on the back, and soot and snow on the breast. When she shook herself, the brass bells above her orange claws jingled. Even when the man stopped, the scythe-blade wings trembled with eagerness or fear; the falcon was a young bird.

"The wind is very strong," said the boy, listening to the hiss of the dry, flowing grass. He was thin and pale, and again and again his watery blue eyes, under a bush of straw-colored hair, stole over the falcon.

The man, too, looked at the falcon, and the sight of the trembling, narrow wings brought a proud smile to his lips. His eyes turned to the changing horizons.

"It will be easy for her." His thin, hard lips barely moved.

The boy's eyes dwelt admiringly upon the bird. Then his glance swerved to his own body, sleek also, but meagre, and wrapped with cast-off army clothes. He let out his breath audibly.

The smell of the grass and earth brought back memories of morning . . .

It was still dark, and cool night-air streamed in through the half-open window.

The boy shivered; he wore shorts, and he felt the cold floor through his socks. Bending over, he drew the strings of the knapsack. Leather squeaked.

Suddenly, hasty feet scratched on the pavement outside, and the vines draping over the garden wall rustled; somebody whistled softly. . . The knapsack in one hand, his shoes in the other, the boy pushed open the door, and listened to the over-loud ticking of the alarm clock downstairs.

Then, a light flicking on below threw the bizarre shadows of the banister on the stairs.

The boy turned and rushed to the window, lingered there undecidedly for a moment as the stairs creaked. The knapsack thudded heavily on the soft lawn beneath the window, and the boy swung his left leg over the windowsill.

"John!"

His mother stood in the door. The hall-light glistened in her undone hair, but her face was in the shadow, and she looked bulky in her dressing gown.

He pulled his leg back in.

"John, I have told you, you can’t go with him."

"But, Mother—"

"I know, darling." She came across the room and put her arms
around him. "But it's just too cold outside. Remember how you were sick in bed after you and Daddy went to Red Springs? Really, John—" Of course he remembered; he remembered many other things, too.

The light went out downstairs; he rubbed his feet on the cold bedposts. Then, the boy cried, his face pressed into his pillow. Downstairs, somebody coughed. Outside, everything was very quiet — waiting for a whistle.

The man had stopped, and the boy looked up at him; the falcon shook her head.

In the distance, the sun burned a hole through the clouds, and the hole drifted along, guiding a giant finger of yellow light over the land. The woods on the hills glowed as the point of the finger passed over them, and for an instant they seemed to cease swaying.

A low mound bulged in the fields; it resembled an old man's head, with scarce grass growing on the slopes and a large, bald spot in the center. A boulder lay there, its scratched, wrinkled top sticking out of the soil, nude and grey.

The rock had been left here by a wandering glacier. The wind had piled dust and loose soil around it and had sown grass and weeds on it, and the rain and the snow flowed and rested in its wrinkles and scars.

The man and the boy stopped on the bare spot, and the boy put down a bag which he had been carrying by a strap over his shoulder. There was the number 705166 on the bag, and the letters "U.S.A.," and the olive-drab canvas was freckled with spots of old blood. Inside the bag there was a sharp knife, a slab of raw horsemeat, three leather snaps and a small, oval, stuffed bag, with a pair of pigeon wings and a long cord attached to it.

Silently swallowing his cough, the boy went to work. Although he had never done it before, he had been told — it was his privilege — and he knew exactly what was expected of him. He cut the raw meat into finger-shaped strips, and tied one strip to the back of the stuffed bag. Then he checked the cord.

The man watched the boy, a smile of satisfaction on his lips. He thought of the envious looks of the other falconers at the last meeting. They had hawks, too, clumsy, brainless goshawks. But he, he had found the dream of every falconer, he had found a peregrine's nest after years of waiting and searching.
a trance they nodded. The wind pulled on their clothes, but their eyes met and smiled.

Quickly the man lifted his left fist and threw the bird against the wind. The falcon lingered for a moment on quickly beating wings, as if she expected the sudden jerk of the training-line. But then the fanned tail folded, the wings beat more regularly, and the wind carried her off.

A small, storm-torn tree waved its naked arms some two hundred yards away. The bird, not yet at ease in her new freedom, aimed her flight toward it. She flew low, keeping near the ground, avoiding the heavier wind gusts.

The man on the mound watched the flight with squinting eyes. His nostrils quivered, and tears ran down his brown cheeks, forced out by the biting wind. The boy at his side coughed freely now and then jumped up and down as though to discharge the phlegm in his chest.

As the bird alighted in the tree, the man swore under his breath. The skin over his cheek bones became white, and his eyebrows met in a frown. The boy looked at him from the side — questioning. In the tree, the falcon shook her feathers, and pulled one foot underneath the long breast downs.

"Give me the featherplay. Quick, dammit!"

The boy, with trembling fingers, grabbed the stuffed bag with the meat tied to it. The cord tangled in his legs and he fell.

The man cursed again, and the boy jerked at the cord. Finally, the string came loose, and the man grabbed it and swung the dummy in wide circles around his head.

The bird in the tree suddenly stretched her body out, thin and long. She knew that clumsy, feathered, giant bee circling the man meant food. The falcon was hungry, and she was young. Slowly she spread her wings, and the wind picked her off the tree.

This time she was carried upward by the onrushing gusts, and she had to fly. The two feathered sickles strained, and when they beat down the primaries bent and hissed as the air passed through them. The wind rocked the bird like a dead leaf, but she made headway, fighting like a hooked fish against the pull of the line, yet unable to resist it.

The man laughed; he laughed silently, drawing back his thin lips. It looked almost like a snarl, and the boy watched him with wondering, thoughtful eyes. He stuck his hands into the pockets of his baggy pants and jumped up and down. The man turned his snarling face upon him, and the boy stopped abruptly.

The falcon was now almost overhead, and the man hid the dummy underneath the green bag.

Hesitating for a moment, the bird slid off in a wide circle. The man swung the featherplay again, and the falcon, cocking her head, turned. The bells on her legs jingled with each wing-beat, and the small aluminum address plate flashed for an instant in the sun. She felt at home now, soaring, rowing under the fleeing clouds. The wings beat purposefully: driving, braking; and the tailfeathers shifted, fanned, and folded again.

The boy tapped the man on the shoulder. A pigeon came winging over the fields, swiftly cutting the wind. The falcon, whose attention had been centered on the featherplay, suddenly took a sharp turn.

The man's face twitched as he watched the bird shoot upward; he laughed nervously, half to himself. He stooped and crumbled a clod of earth in his fist, and the wind carried the dirt a little way before it fell to the ground.

High above the pigeon, the falcon suddenly dropped forward. As the pigeon doubled its hasty wing beats, the man shouted his delight and triumph. But the wind plucked the sound apart, silencing it. Like lightning, the falcon dropped earthward, wings drawn tightly to the body, claws stretched back under the wedge-tail.

The man's face was very red. He stood on the tips of his toes, with the wind pulling on his clothes — he seemed to be falling, too. The boy felt the blood prickle under the skin in the back of his neck as he watched the man and the bird.

No sound came but a small cloud of feathers billowed up as the falcon's talons tore into the pigeon's straining back. There was a turmoil of beating wings and spinning bodies that suddenly dissolved into a limp bundle of feathers dropping to the ground; and the sleek shape of the falcon hovered on the wind, then settled on her prey.

The pigeon was still alive; but the sinews and muscle strands of its wings had been ripped and cut apart, and it struggled helplessly. The falcon's blue hooked beak dug into the heavy neck plumage; there was a snap, as when one breaks a match. Two small, glistening rubies of blood appeared on the pigeon's nostrils. The falcon shrieked and spread her wings like shields over her prey,
filling her beak time and again with bloody feathers and shreds of skin and warm flesh.

The man had watched the kill with glowing eyes, his mouth open. In wild excitement, he ran down upon the falcon. The bird suddenly straightened and folded her wings. The sharp wide-open beak cried defiance, and the fierce, bright eyes sparkled in the soot-black head. The feathers on her breast, that had formed a pattern of black and white bars, were now smeared with blood, sticking together, standing out like scales.

As the man, lungs pumping, hands trembling, bent down, the falcon sprang aloft. Thrashing wings knocked the man's hat to the ground and shot the bird upward with the wind. Hesitantly, she circled for a moment above the stooping man, then, with sure, strong wing-beats, she headed upward toward the clouds, in the direction of the blue curtains of the distant hills.

Mechanically the man picked up the pigeon's torn body; the blood ran over his bare hand, warm and sticky, and dropped in regular intervals from the knuckles.

Suddenly he started running, his eyes fixed on the quickly shrinking shape of the falcon. Within a dozen steps he stumbled on the soft, cold-wet chocolate crust of a freshly plowed field. He struggled to his feet, the pigeon still in his right hand. Clumps of earth dropped from his coat. They were wet and small, and didn't burst when they hit the ground. The man turned around. The boy stood helpless, his open mouth hidden behind red-cold hands, his eyes wide under the flying hair.

"The featherplay! Quick! Dammit, run! Run!

The man shook as with fear; but then his expression changed and suddenly he started laughing. The boy stopped, turned, and gave way to a wracking cough. The bird was now a mere dot underneath the swirling clouds. From time to time, the wind brought back a note that might have been the faint jingle of bells of brass.