



A FALCONER ON THE SEASIDE

Short story by E. Harikumar.

Yesterday I saw a bird on my terrace, stricken with fever. It was a cold morning! The bird, sitting on the wall basking in the mellow sunlight was startled at the sound of the door opening. A hawk; with her wings deranged. To regain balance, she fluttered wings and settled down again. Her eyes were sad. Looking at me she nodded.

The whole night I was knocking at your door. Why didn't you open it?

I felt at ease. So it was this bird which made the frightening sounds that I heard intermittently all through the night.

I am feverish. Can't you see that my eyes are red?

Her eyes were red. And I acknowledged that.

It's been two days since I had my food, she said. I flew away from my falconer.

Now only I noticed the iron ring that was put on its leg.

Why did you leave your falconer? I asked.

I shall tell you. Her mean eyes grew yet smaller.

But first give me something to eat. I told you, I am starving for the past two days.

After cutting last night's chapatti into pieces and serving on a plate, I invited the hawk inside.

Thanks! But here it's sunny and a little warm. Whole night I was in the open under the rain.

The hawk was gobbling the chapatti by holding it down with its claws and pulling the other end by its beak. I would have opened the door had I known that it was this bird that was making the sound. Poor thing; it is all wet from last night's rain. May be she is actually having fever.

After finishing three fourths of the chapatti in the plate and rubbing its beak on the floor, the hawk said.

In fact, I left my falconer.

Why...!?

You want to know why? Her eyes turned fierce. He has not been giving me food; and practically nothing since it started raining. Of late I am rarely fed. It is I who was working for him to earn a living. He is ungrateful. I used to jump through three burning rings kept in a row and pick up cards that he threw from high up in the air. I would pick up the right card with the picture of the animal from a deck, when he made their sounds. I never made a mistake. Still he was making me starve; that ungrateful man. So I left him. Let me see if I can live without him.

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Rubbing her beak on the floor once again and kicking the plate in which the chapatti was served; the bird flew away without uttering even a single word of gratitude.

This morning I saw a falconer on the sea shore. He was dark and lean. His torn loose clothes, hair and long beard were fluttering in the strong wind from the sea. He had a rucksack on his shoulder and was holding three small iron rings in his hand. He kept halting every now and then and shaded his eyes from the sun with his right palm, looked up at the sky and whistled. I noticed his pale face as he approached. One thing was for sure. He had not had any food for the past few days! And his sunken eyes were sad.

My bird flew away, he said. He shrugged as if saying 'what can I do'. He tried to smile and as it turned out to be something like a whimper, he stopped abruptly.

My bird flew away, he repeated.

He was moving forward as if possessed.

And I asked him. Why did the bird leave you?

Huh! He stopped; moved the rucksack from his right shoulder to his left shoulder and said. That was a pretty hawk.

As if implying that all pretty hawks would fly away!

Do you know what a beautiful bird she was?

A hawk! I had no opinion whatsoever; so said nothing.

What all tricks she used to perform for me! Displaying the three small rings in his hand, he continued. She used to fly through these rings while it was burning! In fact she burnt her wings during training and couldn't fly for quite some time after that. When new wings grew, she started practicing again! That was her dedication! She used to catch cards that I threw high up in the air and bring it back to me one by one. She could pick up pictures of animals from a deck of cards based on the sounds that I made. When I barked, the dog's picture and when I roared, the lion's. Similarly, she picked up cards of other animals.

It was she who earned food for me. She had a very high esteem about me. Once again he looked up at the sky and keeping his head in a slightly slanting position whistled in a peculiar way.

No hope, he said. I don't think she will ever return.

Water droplets from a wave that crashed heavily on the shore stuck to his hair and beard.

Why did she leave you?

He turned his face. Obviously he was disheartened. Sadness returned to his eyes. And he murmured.

I couldn't feed her. Poor thing ... she was starving for the past three days. I was not getting any money due to the incessant rains that lasted for ten days. Pointing at the five star hotels he continued; those people wouldn't come even near the swimming pool.

The swimming pool was facing the sea. So, his clients were the guests of the hotels.

As if reading my mind, he said; the local people will never have



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any fascination for such things!

With whatever money left with me, I bought food for the bird for the first five days. Then when even that reserve was over, I was in real trouble. My heart broke when she cried with hunger. She was everything to me. A person who has never begged in life; finally I was even prepared to do that. But by then she had left me.

He looked up at the sky and whistled loudly. Thick clouds were gathering. It might rain any time now.

Okay, let me go! He walked past. I watched him disappear in the distance. On the way too, he stopped intermittently and whistled with both hands raised towards the sky.

It started with a few drops and then rained heavily and incessantly. And the sea roared violently.

The next day morning I saw the falconer again on the sea shore. The hawk was sitting on his left shoulder. Seeing me from a distance, he raised his hand and shouted.

I got my bird back!

Then as if to prove it, he raised the bird from his shoulder and showed me. The bird fluttered its wings to escape from his hold and perched again on his left shoulder. He took groundnuts from a small paper cone one by one and fed the bird.

I could clearly see happiness on his face as he approached. His eyes were glistening. Underneath those expressions of gladness, I could still gather that he had been starving the previous night as well. He caressed his pet bird proudly. Unable to contain her extreme delight, the bird was cooing and pecking on the falconer's hair and fluttering its wings.

Let me go now. Taking the bird from his shoulder and kissing it, he said; the sky is clear. Looks like it will not rain again. The foreigners must have already arrived at the swimming pool.

I watched him walk away with the bird with energetic strides despite his exhaustion. And when he was just a speck in the distance, I stopped looking at him and then looked around.

A huge wave shattered with a thud on the shore like a glass, leaving behind minute water particles in the air.

I could feel solitude growing like an ant hill around me. Memories of my sweetheart, who left me at the prime of my youth without giving any hope of a return, came to my mind. And I realized that ultimately I will be left with only these mad waves, the wind that flies away kissing the waves and the sand particles that are being crushed under my feet as my companions.

Why is my vision getting blurred! Is it that the water particles in the air are getting solidified in my eyes?

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