

The Object of the Princess's Affection

by Bob Shepherd



nce there was a princess, very vain, very corrupt, as princesses are wont to be, and sometimes, in the evening, she would sit by her window and stare across the great courtyard of the castle keep and wonder why, with all her riches, authority, prospects, and intrigues, she felt unfulfilled. One evening as she sat in something like despair, looking into a vague distance, she saw through her tears a shape on the battlements. Focusing, she resolved the image: a falcon. And as she watched, it took wing, diving downward with great speed toward the courtyard and then, extending its wings, soaring suddenly high into the air, powerful, magnificent. It drifted for a time in the high currents, circling, and then was gone.

As it happened, a young man, a courtier, had lain long pining for the princess who, as princesses are wont to be, was cold toward him. And she kept, of course, her coldness in oscillation with coyness, never tipping entirely in one direction or the other, so as to feel her power over the young man and to drive him mad. So successful was she in this cruel amusement that the young man lost both sleep and weight to such measure that his mother and father began to fear for his life. Yet when the princess promised to return his affection if he but brought her the falcon (a present, she said, for her father the king), the young man found strength where there was none and tracked the falcon upon the mountain crags and brought the noble creature back. The princess fulfilled,

minimally, her obligation to the young man, taking her pleasure of him and then dismissing him from the court, and so from her presence, forever after.

The king found no use for the falcon, for though its beauty was undeniable, it had fully matured in the wild and would not be bent to the will of a trainer. So it was that he acceded to his daughter's request that the bird's wings be clipped that she might keep it in a cage in her chambers.

And, of course, what the princess had, in the end, was not the magnificent creature she had seen, fierce against the gloaming. She had a noisy and noisome beastling, neither raptor nor pet, as hobbled as her spirit, and the Lord of the Forests cursed her so that as the bird withered away, her spirit did in equal measure, until, at last, she lay upon her bed, on a fine ermine coverlet, neither alive nor dead, staring into a vague distance but seeing nothing. 