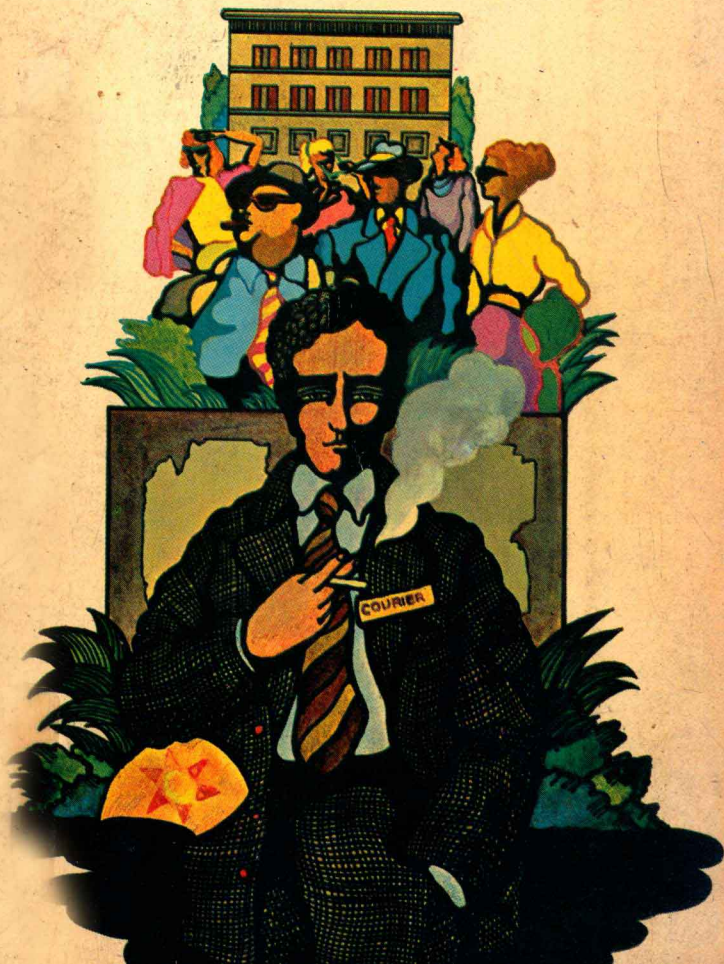


Daphne du Maurier



The Flight of the Falcon



Penguin Book 2946
The Flight of the Falcon

Daphne du Maurier is the second daughter of the famous actor and theatre manager-producer, the late Sir Gerald du Maurier, and grand-daughter of George du Maurier, the much-loved *Punch* artist and author of *Trilby* and *Peter Ibbetson*. After being educated at home with her sisters and then in Paris, she began writing short stories and articles in 1928, and in 1931 her first novel, *The Loving Spirit*, was published. Two others followed. Her reputation was established with her frank biography of her father, *Gerald: A Portrait*, and her Cornish novel, *Jamaica Inn*. When *Rebecca* came out in 1938 she suddenly found herself, to her great surprise, one of the most popular authors of the day. The book went into thirty-nine English impressions in the next twenty years and has been translated into more than twenty languages. Sir Laurence Olivier starred in the film under Hitchcock's direction.

Since then, besides several best-selling novels, which are available in Penguins, she has written plays, short stories, and a biography of Branwell Brontë. *The Du Mauriers*, her account of her relations in the last century, was published as a Penguin in 1949.

Her three most popular novels were all inspired by her Cornish home, Menabilly, where she and her family have lived for twenty years. Daphne du Maurier was married to the late Lieut-General Sir Frederick Browning, wartime commander of Airborne Forces. She has two daughters and a son.

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Author's Note

The Flight of the Falcon is a work of fiction.

Although Ruffano was inspired by an existing Italian city the topography, the events described, the inhabitants and every member of the university are purely imaginary.

We were right on time. Sunshine Tours informed its passengers on the printed itinerary that their coach was due at the Hotel Splendido, Rome, at approximately 1800 hours. Glancing at my watch, I saw that it wanted three minutes to the hour.

'You owe me five hundred lire,' I said to Beppo.

The driver grinned. 'We'll see about that in Naples,' he said. 'In Naples I shall present you with a bill for more than two thousand lire.'

Our bets were continuous throughout the tour. We each kept a book, checked the kilometres against the time, and then settled up when either of us felt like paying. The latter generally fell to me, no matter who had come out on top with the betting. As courier, I received the larger tips.

I turned round, smiling, to my load of merchandise. 'Welcome to Rome, ladies and gentlemen,' I said, 'the city of popes, emperors, and Christians thrown to the lions, not to mention movie stars.'

A wave of laughter greeted me. Somebody in the back row cheered. They liked this sort of thing. Any facetious remark made by the courier helped to establish the relationship between passengers and pilot. Beppo, as driver, may have been responsible for their safety on the road, but I, as guide, manager, mediator and shepherd of souls, held their lives in my hands. A courier can make or break a tour. Like the conductor of a choir he must, by force of personality, induce his team to sing in harmony; subdue the raucous, encourage the timid, conspire with the young, flatter the old.

I climbed down from my seat, flinging wide the door, and saw the porters and pages hurrying from the swing-doors of the hotel to meet us. I watched my flock descend, sausages from a machine, fifty all told – no need to count the heads, for

we had not stopped between Assisi and Rome – and led the way to the reception desk.

‘Sunshine Tours, Anglo-American Friendship League,’ I said.

I shook hands with the reception clerk. We were old acquaintances. I had been on this particular route for two years now.

‘Good trip?’ he asked.

‘Pretty fair,’ I replied, ‘apart from the weather. It was snowing in Florence yesterday.’

‘It’s still March,’ he said. ‘What do you expect? You people start your season too soon.’

‘Tell them that at the head office in Genoa,’ I answered.

Everything was in order. We held block bookings, of course, and because it was early in the season the management had fixed my whole party on the second floor. This would please them. Later in the year we should be lucky to get the fifth, and tucked away in the rear of the building at that.

The clerk watched my party file into the reception lounge. ‘What have you brought us?’ he asked. ‘The holy alliance?’

‘Don’t ask me,’ I shrugged. ‘They joined forces at Genoa on Tuesday. Some sort of club. Beef and barbarians. The usual treatment in the restaurant at seven-thirty?’

‘It’s all laid on,’ he said, ‘and the relief coach ordered for nine. I wish you joy.’

We use certain code-words for our clients in the touring business. The English are beef to us, and the Americans barbarians. It may not be complimentary, but it’s apt. These people were running wild on pasture land and prairie when we were ruling the world from Rome. No offence intended.

I turned to greet the respective leaders of my Anglo-American group. ‘Everything’s fine,’ I said. ‘Accommodation for all on the second floor. Telephones in every room. Any queries ring down to the desk and they’ll put you through to me. Dinner at seven-thirty. I’ll meet you here. The reception manager will now show you to your rooms. OK?’

Theoretically, this was where I laid off for an hour and twenty minutes, found my own small lair, had a shower and collapsed, but it seldom worked that way. Nor did it today.

My telephone buzzed as soon as I'd taken off my jacket.

'Mr Fabbio?'

'Speaking.'

'It's Mrs Taylor here. Utter and complete disaster! I've left every package I bought in Florence in that hotel in Perugia.'

I might have known. She had left a coat in Genoa and a pair of overshoes in Siena. She had insisted that these things, almost certainly unnecessary south of Rome, must be telephoned for and forwarded to Naples.

'Mrs Taylor, I'm so sorry. What were in the packages?'

'Breakables, mostly. There were two pictures . . . a statuette of Michelangelo's David . . . some cigarette boxes . . .'

'Don't worry I'll take care of it. I'll telephone Perugia right away and see that your packages get to our office in Genoa, and are waiting there for your return.'

It depended on how busy they were at reception whether I left them to put through the call and make the inquiry, or dealt with it myself. Better do it myself. It would save time in the long run. I had sized up the Taylor woman as a package-leaver as soon as she joined us. She trailed belongings. Spectacles, head-scarves, picture postcards kept falling out of her outsize handbag. It is an English failing, a fault of the species. Apart from this, beef give very little trouble, though in their desire to seek the sun they blister more readily than other nationalities. Bare-armed, bare-legged, they're into cotton frocks and shorts the first day of the tour, turning brick-red in the process. Then I have to conduct them to the nearest chemist's shop for salves and lotions.

The telephone buzzed once more. Not my call to Perugia, but one of the barbarians. A woman again, naturally. The husbands never bother me.

'Mr Fabbio?'

'Speaking.'

'Guess what. It's a boy!'

I did a double-think. Barbarians give you their life history the first evening in Genoa. Which of them was it that was expecting her first grandchild, back in Denver, Colorado? Mrs Hiram Bloom.

‘Congratulations, Mrs Bloom. This calls for a special celebration.’

‘I know it. I’m so excited I don’t know what I’m doing.’ The scream of delight nearly broke my eardrum. ‘Now, I want just you, and one or two of the others, to meet Mr Bloom and myself in the bar before dinner, to drink the little boy’s health. Shall we say seven-fifteen?’

It would cut down my free time to half-an-hour, and that call from Perugia hadn’t yet come through. Nothing to be done. Courtesy first and foremost.

‘That’s very kind of you, Mrs Bloom. I’ll be there. All well with your daughter-in-law?’

‘She’s fine. Just fine.’

I hung up before she could read me out the cable. Time for a shave, anyway, and with luck a shower.

You have to be wary about accepting invitations from clients. A birthday or a wedding anniversary is legitimate, or the arrival of grandchild. Nothing much else, or it tends to make bad blood and you are half-way to ruining your tour. Besides, where drinking is concerned a courier has to watch his intake. Whatever happens to his party, he must remain sober. So must the driver. This is not always easy.

I dealt with the Perugia call while still dripping from the shower, and after struggling into a clean shirt went downstairs to inspect the arrangements made for us in the restaurant. Two long tables in the middle of the room, each seating twenty-five, and in the centre of either table, dwarfing the flowers, the bunched flags of both nations, the Stars and Stripes and the Union Jack. This never fails to please – the clients feel that it gives tone to the proceedings.

A word with the head waiter, promising him to have my party seated by seven-thirty sharp. They liked us to have our main course finished and the dessert served before the other diners wandered in to their tables. It was important for us, too. We worked to a tight schedule, and were due to take off for our tour of ‘Rome By Night’ at nine o’clock.

A final check on time, and then the short celebration drink in the bar. There were only a handful of them gathered to toast baby Bloom, but you could hear them from the entrance hall,

where the excluded beef hung about in twos and threes, aloof, disdainful, their faces buried in the English newspapers. The extrovert barbarian roar had turned the Anglo-Saxons dumb.

Mrs Bloom glided towards me, a frigate in full sail. 'Now, Mr Fabbio, you'll not refuse champagne?'

'Half a glass, Mrs Bloom. Just to wish long life to your grandson.'

There was something touching in her happiness. Generosity exuded from her person. She placed her arm through mine and drew me forward into the group. How kind they were, dear God, how kind. . . . Epitomizing, in their all-embracing warmth, the barbarian hunger for love. I drew back, suffocated, then, ashamed of myself, let the wave engulf me. Back in Genoa I had many tributes from Mrs Bloom's compatriots. Christmas cards by the score, letters, greetings. Did I remember the trip two years ago? When would I visit them in the States? They often thought of me. They had named their youngest son Armino. The sincerity of those messages shamed me. I never answered them.

'I hate to break this up, Mrs Bloom. But it's just on seven-thirty.'

'What you say goes, Mr Fabbio. You're the boss.'

The two nations mingled in the entrance hall, halting momentarily as they greeted new acquaintances, the women appraising each other's dresses. Then through to the restaurant drifted my fifty head of cattle, lowing, murmuring, myself the stockman in the rear. There were cries of pleasure at the sight of the flags. For a moment I feared a burst into national song, 'The Star-spangled Banner', 'God Save the Queen' – it had happened before – but I caught the head waiter's eye and we managed to seat them before patriotism could do its worst. Then to my own small table in the corner. One lone male barbarian, middle-aged, swimmy-eyed, had placed himself at the corner of one of the long tables, from where he could watch me. I had him taped. I knew his kind. He would get no encouragement from the courier, but we might have trouble with him in Naples.

While I ate I did the day's accounts. This was my custom. I shut my ears to the sound of voices and the clatter of plates. If the accounts are not kept up to date you never get straight,

and then there is hell to pay with head office. Book-keeping did not bother me: I found it relaxing. And then, when the figures were totted up, the notebook put away, my plate removed, I could sit back, finish my wine and smoke a cigarette. This was the real time of reckoning – no longer of sums to be forwarded every day to Genoa, but of my own motives. How long would it continue? Why was I doing this? What urge drove me, like a stupefied charioteer, on my eternal, useless course?

‘We get paid for it, don’t we?’ said Beppo. ‘We make good money.’

Beppo had a wife and three children in Genoa. Milan – Florence – Rome – Naples – they were all the same to him. A job was a job. Three days off duty at the end of it, home, and bed. He was satisfied. No inner demon broke his rest or asked him questions.

The babble of voices, topped by the barbarians, rose to a roar. My little flock was in full cry. Replete, at ease, their tongues loosened with whatever had filled their glasses, expectant of what the night would bring them – and what could it bring them but a bedding down beside their spouses after peering at buildings old, remote and alien to them, falsely lit for their enjoyment, glimpsed briefly through the windows, steamy with their breath, of a hired coach? – they spilt themselves, for a brief moment, of doubt and care. They were no longer individuals. They were one. They were escaping from all that bound and tied them – but to what?

The waiter bent over me. ‘The coach is waiting,’ he said. Ten minutes to nine. Time for them to fetch coats, hats, scarves powder their faces and relieve themselves. It was not until I had counted the heads, as they climbed into the coach at one minute after nine, that I realized we mustered forty-eight. Two were missing. I checked with the driver – not Beppo, who was free to spend the evening as he pleased, but a man native to the city.

‘There were two signore in advance of the rest,’ he told me. ‘They walked off together, down the street.’

I glanced over my shoulder towards the via Veneto. The Hotel Splendido stands one street away, in comparative peace and quiet, but from the pavement one can see the bright lights

and the gay shop-windows, and watch the traffic surge towards the Porta Pinciana. Here, for most women, is greater lure than the Colosseum we were bound for.

'No,' said the driver, 'they went that way.' He pointed left. Then, from around the block, into the via Sicilia, came the hurrying figures. I should have known it. The two retired school-teachers from south London. Forever inquiring, forever critical, they were zealous for reform. It was this couple who had bade me stop the coach on the road to Siena because, they insisted, a man was ill-treating his oxen. It was this couple who, finding a stray cat in Florence, made me waste half-an-hour of our precious time seeking its home. A mother, admonishing her child in Perugia, had been in her turn admonished by the school-teachers. Now, bridling and outraged, they clattered towards me.

'Mr Fabbio . . . someone should do something. There's a poor old woman, very ill, humped in the doorway of a church round the corner.'

I contained myself with difficulty. The churches of Rome give sanctuary to all beggars, down-and-outs and drunks who care to sprawl upon their steps until such time as the police drive them away.

'Don't concern yourselves, ladies. This is quite usual. The police will see to her. Now hurry, please. The coach is waiting.'

'But it's absolutely scandalous. . . . In England we . . .'

I took both women firmly by the arm and propelled them towards the coach 'You are not in England, ladies, you are in Rome. In the city of the emperors oxen, cats, children and the aged receive their just reward. The old woman is lucky in that refuse is no longer fed to the lions.'

The school-teachers were still choking with indignation as the coach swept left, past the very church where the woman lay.

'There, Mr Fabbio, look . . . there!'

Obedient, I nudged the driver. He slowed down, co-operative, to give me a better view. Those passengers who were seated on the right of the coach stared likewise. The street-lamp showed the figure in relief. I have had moments in my life, as has everyone, when something in memory clicks, when

we are aware of a sensation of what the French call 'déjà vu'. Somewhere, some time, and God alone knew when, I had seen that bowed posture, the ample drapery spread, the arms folded, the head buried under the weight of shawls. But not in Rome. My vision lay elsewhere. The memory was childhood's, blotted out by the years between. As we swept forward to the flood-lights and the tourist illusion, one of the lovers on the back seat produced a mouth-organ and broke into the strains of a song long stale to the driver and myself, but popular with barbarian and beef - 'Arrivederci Roma'.

It was some time after midnight when we drew up at the Hotel Splendido once again. My troupe of fifty, yawning, stretching and I trust satisfied, rolled out of the coach one by one and passed through the swing-doors of the hotel. They had by this time as much individuality as machines mass-produced off an assembly line.

I was dead, and longed above all things for bed. Instructions for the morning, last messages, thanks, good night from all and it was over. Oblivion for seven hours. The courier could pass out. When, as I thought, the lift doors had closed on the last of them, I sighed, and lit a cigarette. It was the best moment of the day. Then, from behind a pillar where he must have hovered unobserved, stalked the lone middle-aged barbarian. He swung from the hips, as they all do when they walk, in unconscious identification with their coloured brethren.

'How about a night-cap in my room?' he said.

'Sorry,' I answered curtly, 'it's against regulations.'

'Ah, come off it,' he said, 'it's after hours.'

He rolled forward, and with a half-glance over his shoulder slipped a note into my hand. 'Room 244,' he murmured, and went.

I turned through the swing-doors into the street. It had happened before, it would happen again; my rebuff and his consequent hostility would be a factor to be reckoned with throughout the tour. It must be borne. The courtesy I owed to my employers in Genoa forbade complaint. But I was not paid by Sunshine Tours to appease the lust or loneliness of clients.

I walked to the end of the block and stood a moment, drinking the cold air. A car or two passed by and vanished. The

traffic hummed behind me in the via Veneto, out of sight. I looked across to the church and the figure lay there still, immobile on the doorstep.

I glanced down at the note in my hand. It was ten thousand lire. A hint, I supposed, of favours to come. I went across the street and bent over the sleeping woman. The furtive odour of stale wine, worn clothes, rose to my nostrils. I fumbled for the hidden hand under the enveloping shawls and put the note into it. Suddenly she stirred. She lifted her head. The features were aquiline and proud, the eyes, once large, were now sunken, and the straggling grey hair fell in strands to her shoulders: She must have travelled from some distance, for she had two baskets beside her containing bread and wine, and yet a further woollen shawl. Once again I was seized with that sense of recognition, that link with the past which could not be explained. Even the hand that, warm despite the cold air, held on to mine in gratitude awakened an involuntary, reluctant response. She stared at me. Her lips moved.

I turned, I think I ran. Back to the Hotel Splendido. If she called to me – and I could have sworn she called – then I would not hear. She had the ten thousand lire, and would find food and shelter in the morning. She had nothing to do with me, nor I with her. The draped figure, suppliant, as though in mourning, was an illusion of my brain, and had no connexion with a drunken peasant. At all costs I must sleep. Be fresh for the morning, the visit to St Peter's the Vatican, the Sistine Chapel, the Sant' Angelo . . .

A courier, a charioteer, has no time. No time.

2

I awoke with a start. Had someone called Beo? I turned on the light, got out of bed, drank a glass of water, looked at my watch. It was 2 a.m. I fell back into bed, but the dream was with me still. The bare impersonal hotel bedroom, my clothes flung on the chair, the account book and the itinerary of the tour beside me on the table were part of a day-by-day existence

belonging to another world, not the one into which my dreaming self had inadvertently stumbled. Beo ... Il Beato, the blessed one. Childhood's name, given me by my parents and by Marta, because, no doubt, I was an afterthought, a later addition to the family circle, there being eight years between my elder brother Aldo and myself.

Beo ... Beo. ... The cry rang in my ears as it had done in my dream, and I could not rid myself of the sense of oppression and fear. Sleeping, I had been a traveller in time, no longer a courier, and hand-in-hand with Aldo I stood in the side-chapel of the church of San Cipriano in Ruffano, staring above me at the altar-piece. The picture was of the Raising of Lazarus, and out of a gaping tomb came the figure of the dead man, still fearfully wrapped in his shroud – all save his face, from which the bindings had somehow fallen away, revealing staring, suddenly awakened eyes, that looked upon his Lord with terror. The Christ, in profile, summoned him with beckoning finger. Before the tomb, in supplication and distress, her arms bowed, her flowing garment spread, lay a woman, supposedly the Mary of Bethany who, often confused with Mary Magdalena so adored her Master. But to my childish mind she resembled Marta. Marta, the nurse who fed and dressed me every day, who rode me upon her knee, who rocked me in her arms and called me Beo.

This altar-piece haunted me at night, and Aldo knew it. On Sundays and feast-days, when we accompanied our parents and Marta to church, and instead of going to the Duomo worshipped at the parish-church of San Cipriano, it so happened that we stood on the left of the nave, nearest to the chapel. Unconscious, like all parents, of the dread that possessed their child, they never looked to see that my brother, clasping my hand in his, urged me ever nearer to the wide-flung gates of the side-chapel, until I was compelled to lift my head and stare.

'When we go home,' whispered Aldo, 'I will dress you as Lazarus, and I shall be the Christ and summon you.'

This was the worst of all. More full of terror even than the altar-piece itself. For Aldo, searching in the press where Marta kept the soiled linen before putting it to the wash, would