

# Federigo

By Prosper Mérimée

Once upon a time there was a young nobleman named Federigo. He was handsome, well-built, courteous and easy tempered, but of I exceedingly dissolute habits, for he was inordinately fond of wine, women, and gaming, especially gaming. He never went to confession, and he frequented the churches only to find chances for indulging in sinful pleasures.

Now Federigo ruined at the gambling-table twelve young men who afterward became brigands and perished unshriven in a fierce battle with the *condottieri* of the King. And it befell that he himself, in less time than it takes in the telling, lost all that he had won, and in addition his whole patrimony, save a little manor whither he retired to hide his poverty behind the hills of Cava.

For three years he had been living in seclusion, hunting by day and in the evening playing his game of *hombre* with his steward. One evening when he had just come home after the best day's hunting he had had, Jesus Christ, followed by the twelve apostles, knocked at his door and asked for shelter. Federigo, who was a generous soul, was delighted to see the guests come at a time when he had the wherewithal to feast them well. So he welcomed the pilgrims into his cottage, invited them with all possible cordiality to his board, and begged them to excuse him if he could not offer them what was befitting them, as they found him at a moment when his larder was exceedingly bare. Our Lord, who knew what to believe concerning the opportunities of this visit, forgave Federigo this little display of vanity, since he showed himself so hospitably inclined.

"We shall be well satisfied with what you have," He said to him: "but pray have supper served as speedily as you may: for my friend here is very hungry," he added, pointing to Saint Peter.

Federigo did not wait to be asked a second time, and wishing to offer his guests something besides what he had got in the hunt, he ordered his steward to lay hands on his last kid, which was straightway put on the spit.

When supper was ready and the company seated at the table, Federigo had only one regret, which was that his wine was not better. "Sire," he said to Jesus Christ, "I wish very much that my wine were better; nevertheless, such as it is, I offer it with sincere hospitality."

Whereupon our Lord, having tasted the wine, said to Federigo,

"Why do you complain? Your wine is perfect. Just ask my friend here what he thinks about it" (pointing to Saint Peter).

Saint Peter, having quaffed it with relish, declared it excellent (*proprio stupendo*) and begged his host to drink it with him.

Federigo, who looked upon all this as mere civilities, nevertheless acceded to the apostle's request; but what was his surprise to find that this wine was more delicious than any he had ever tasted in the days of his affluence! Becoming aware, from this miracle, of the presence of the Saviour, he at once arose from his seat as being unworthy to sit at table with that holy company. But our Lord commanded him to be seated; which order he obeyed without any great protest. After the supper, during which they were waited upon by the steward and his wife, Jesus retired with the apostles into the room which had been prepared for them. Federigo, being left alone with the steward, played his game of *hombre*, as usual, and drank what was left of the miraculous wine.

The next day when the holy travellers were gathered together in the parlour with the master of the house, Jesus Christ said to Federigo:

“We are greatly pleased with the reception which thou hast accorded us, and we wish to recompense thee. Ask any three favors and they will be granted thee; for all power has been given to us in Heaven, and upon earth, and in Hades.”

Then Federigo drew from his pocket a pack of cards which he always carried with him and said: “Master, grant that I may always win when I play with these cards.”

“So be it!” said Jesus Christ.

But Saint Peter, who was near Federigo, whispered to him, “Of what art thou thinking, miserable sinner? Thou shouldst pray the Master for the salvation of thy soul.”

“Oh, I don’t worry much about that,” answered Federigo.

“Thou hast yet two favors to receive,” said Jesus Christ.

“Master,” continued the host, “since Thou art so gracious, grant, I pray you, that whosoever climbs into the orange tree that shades my door shall be unable to come down again without my permission.”

“So be it,” said Jesus Christ.

At these words the apostle Saint Peter, nudging his neighbor, said “Miserable sinner, dost thou not fear the hellfire which awaits thy sins? Ask the Master to accord thee a place in Paradise; there is still time. . . .”

“There is no hurry,” replied Federigo, drawing away from the apostle. And our Lord said: “What dost thou ask as a third favor?”

“I beg,” he answered, “that whosoever may seat himself upon this bench shall be unable to rise without my permission.”

Our Lord having granted this prayer as well as the other two, departed with his disciples.

The last apostle was no more than out of the house, when Federigo, wishing to prove the virtue of his cards, called his steward, and played a game of *hombre* with him without looking at his hand. He won the game in a trice; as well as a second and a third. So being quite confirmed in his confidence, he set out for town, lodged at the best inn, where he took the finest apartment. The news of his arrival spread very quickly and his old dissolute companions crowded to see him.

“We thought that you were lost for good and all,” cried Don Giuseppe. “We were assured that you had become a hermit.”

“That was quite true,” answered Federigo.

“How the deuce have you been spending your time these last three years that we have not been seeing you?” the others asked all at once.

“In praying, my dear brethren,” answered Federigo in a most pious voice. “Here is my prayer book,” he added, drawing from his pocket his pack of cards which he had most carefully preserved.

This answer created an outburst of laughing, and everyone was convinced that Federigo had repaired his shattered fortunes in foreign parts at the expense of less skillful players than those with whom he then was, and they were all keen to ruin him a second time. Some wished without any further delay to drag him over to a gambling table. But Federigo, after begging them to defer the game until evening, invited the company into a room, where according to his orders a dainty repast had been served. It was hailed with enthusiasm, needless to say.

This dinner was somewhat more lively than the apostles’; it is true nothing was drunk but Malvoisie and Lacryma, but the merrymakers with one exception knew no better wine. Before the arrival of his guests Federigo had provided himself with a pack of cards exactly like the first,

in order that he might at will substitute it for the other, and by losing one or two games avoid suspicion on the part of his adversaries. One he carried in his right pocket and the other in his left.

When the dinner was over and the noble band seated around a baize-covered table Federigo placed the unblest cards first on the table and limited the stakes to a moderate sum for the whole séance. Wishing then to interest himself in the game and gauge his own ability, he played his best for the first two games, and lost them one after the other, not without a certain amount of inward annoyance. Then he called for wine and taking advantage of the moment when the winners were drinking to their past and future successes, he took away the unblest cards and replaced them with the pack that had been blest. When the third game was begun, as Federigo paid no attention to his own hand whatever, he had leisure to watch the others—and he found they were not playing fairly. This discovery delighted him greatly, as he felt that he could with a perfectly clear conscience empty his adversaries' pockets. He had been ruined, he now saw, by their dishonesty, not by their skill in playing, nor their good fortune. He could then have a better opinion on his own relative force, an opinion justified by previous successes. Self-esteem, to what will it not attach itself? The certainty of revenge and of gain are sentiments that are very sweet to the human heart. Federigo experienced them one and all at the same time. But thinking of the twelve young men at whose expense he had grown rich, and feeling persuaded that they were the only honest players with whom he had ever had to do, he repented for the first time his victory over them. A slight shadow clouded his face which had been shining with joy, and he sighed deeply as he won the third game.

This game was succeeded by several others, and Federigo arranged to win the greater number of them, so that he raked in, that first evening, I enough to pay for his dinner, and the rent of his apartments for a month. That was all he wished for the first day. His companions withdrew greatly disappointed, but promising to return the following day.

The next day and succeeding days Federigo arranged to win and lose so aptly that in a short time he acquired a considerable fortune, without anyone's suspecting the real cause. Then he left his hotel and went to live in a large palace, where he gave, from time to time, most magnificent entertainments. The loveliest women disputed his most passing glance. His table was covered every day with the most exquisite wines, and the palace of Federigo became renowned as the center of pleasure.

At the end of a year's discreet gambling he resolved to make his revenge complete by draining the pockets of the foremost noblemen of the country. To this end, having converted the greater part of his money into precious stones, he invited those gentlemen eight days beforehand to an unusually splendid feast, for which he had called into requisition the best musicians, dancers, etc. This entertainment was to end with a game with fat stakes. Those who had no money squeezed it out of the Jews. The others brought what they had, and all was swept away. Federigo departed in the night with his gold and his diamonds.

From that moment he never used the magic cards except with dishonest gamblers, finding that he could play a strong enough game himself to win from the others. So he went through all the cities in the world, playing everywhere, always winning, and at every halt feasting upon the fat of the land.

Nevertheless, the memory of his twelve victims was ever present in his mind, and poisoned all his joys. At last he decided one fine day either to deliver them, or to perish with them.

Having so resolved he set out for hell with a staff in his hand and a sack on his back, and with no escort save his favorite hound Marchesella. When he reached Sicily he climbed Mount Gibel,

then went down into the volcano as far below the foot of the mountain as the mountain itself rises above Piedmont. Thence, in order to go to Pluto's abode, you must cross a court which is guarded by Cerberus. Federigo got across without, any difficulty, while Cerberus was playing with the hound, and knocked on Pluto's door.

When he had been led into the monarch's presence: "Who art thou?" demanded the king of the infernal abyss. "I am Federigo, the gambler."

"What in the devil's name dost thou here?"

"Pluto, if thou deemest the best gambler on earth worthy to play a of *hombre* with thee, here is what I would propose: we shall play as game many games as thou wilt. If I lose by a single game then my soul will rightfully belong to thee, as well as all those that people thy realm. But if I win, I shall have the right to choose from among thy subjects one soul for every game I win, and I shall be entitled to carry them off with me."

"So be it," said Pluto.

And he called for a pack of cards.

"Here is one," said Federigo, immediately drawing from his pocket the miraculous pack, and they began to play. Federigo won the first game, and asked for the soul of Stephen Pagani, one of the twelve whom he wished to save. It was at once handed over, and having received it, he put it in his bag. In the same way he won second game, then a third up to the twelfth game, each time asking for and putting into his sack one of the souls in which he was interested. When he finished the dozen he offered to continue playing.

"Very gladly," said Pluto (who however was annoyed at losing), "but let us go out a moment; some very disagreeable odor seems to pervade this apartment."

Now he was trying to find a pretext for getting rid of Federigo, for scarcely was the latter outsidied with his sack and his souls, when Pluto shouted with all his might to close the door upon him.

Federigo having again traversed the courtyard of Hades without Cerberus's noticing it, so charmed was he with the hound, once more reached the summit of Mount Gibel. Then he called Marchesella, who speedily rejoined him, and went down again toward Messina more elated over this spiritual success than he had ever been over any wordly success. When he reached Messina he set sail to return to *terra firma* and end his days in his old manor house.

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A few months later Marchesella gave birth to a litter of little monsters, some of which had as many as three heads. They were all drowned.

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At the end of thirty years (Federigo was then seventy) Death came to his door and told him to put his affairs in order, for his hour was come.

"I am ready," said the dying man; "but before you carry me off, O Death, give me, I pray you, some of the fruit from the tree that shades my door. Just this one little pleasure and I shall die happy."

"If that is all you need," said Death, "I am quite willing to satisfy you."

He got into the orange tree to gather an orange; but when he tried to get down he could not: Federigo would not allow it.

“Ah! Federigo! You have deceived me,” cried he: “I am now in your power: but give me back my liberty and I will promise you ten more years of life.”

“Ten years! That is not much!” exclaimed Federigo. “If you wish to come down, my friend, you must be more liberal than that.”

“I’ll give you twenty.”

“Come! Be serious!”

“I’ll give you thirty.”

“That is not even one-third enough.”

“Do you wish then to live for a century?”

“Just exactly, my dear.”

“Federigo, you are unreasonable.”

“What would you have? I like to live.”

“Well, then, take a hundred years,” said Death; “it will have to come to that.”

And at once he was able to get down. As soon as Death departed, Federigo arose in perfect health, and began a new life with all the strength of a young man and the experience of an old one. All that is known of this new existence is that he continued to satisfy every craving of his carnal appetite, doing a little good when occasion arose, but giving no more attention to his soul’s salvation than in his first life. The hundred years rolled around and Death came again to knock at his door, and found him in bed.

“Are you ready?” he said. “I have just sent for my confessor,” said Federigo; “sit down by the fire until he comes. I am just waiting to be absolved and then I will fly with you into eternity.”

Death, who was a kindly person, went and sat down on the bench in the inglenook, and waited for a whole hour without seeing any priest appear. Beginning at last to lose patience he said to his host:

“Old man, once again, have you not had time to put your affairs in order during the whole century that has passed since I saw you before?”

“My word, I had something else to do,” answered the old man with a mocking smile.

“Well,” answered Death, indignant at his impiousness, “you have only one minute longer to live.”

“Bah!” said Federigo, while Death tried in vain to get up. “I know that you are too obliging to refuse to grant me a few years by experience of respite.”

“A few years, wretched man!” and he made vain efforts to leave the inglenook.

“Yes, certainly, but this time I shall not require so much, and as I am not very fond of old age I shall be satisfied with eighty years for the third round.”

Death saw that he was held to the bench, as he had been once before to the orange tree, by some supernatural power; but in his rage he was unwilling to grant anything.

“I know how I can bring you to reason,” said Federigo.

And he had three fagots thrown on the fire. In a moment the flames filled the whole fireplace so that Death was horribly tortured.

“Spare me! Spare me!” he cried as he felt the flames burning him to the bone. “I’ll promise you eighty years of health.”

Upon hearing these words Federigo broke the charm, and Death fled half-roasted.

At the end of the time agreed upon he came back to wait for his man, who was awaiting him with his sack on his back.

“Your hour has come this time and no mistake,” said Death, entering brusquely; “no drawing back now. But what do you mean to do with this sack?”

“It contains the souls of twelve gambler friends of mine whom I once delivered from hell.”

“Let them return with you!” said Death, and seizing Federigo by the hair, he flew away toward the south and with his prey plunged down into the abyss of Mount Gibel. When he reached the gate of hell, he knocked three times.

“Who is there?” said Pluto.

“Federigo, the gambler,” answered Death.

“Don’t open the door,” cried Pluto, who at once remembered the twelve games which he had lost; “that rogue would depopulate my realm.”

As Pluto refused to open, Death carried his prisoner off to Purgatory; but the angel at the door refused him admission seeing that he was in a state of mortal sin. It was necessary then at all cost and to the great regret of Death, who bore Federigo a grudge, to wing his way to the celestial regions.

“Who art thou?” said Saint Peter to Federigo, when Death had set him down at the gate of Paradise.

“Your old host,” he answered, “the one who regaled you with the game he himself had hunted.”

“Dost thou dare present thyself here in the state in which I see thee?” cried St. Peter. “Dost thou not know that Heaven is closed to such as thee? What! Thou art not even fit for Purgatory and thou desirest a place in Paradise!”

“Saint Peter,” said Federigo, “is it thus that I received thee when thou camest with thy Divine Master, some hundred and eighty years ago, to ask hospitality from me?”

“That is all very well,” replied Saint Peter in a reproving voice, though somewhat touched by the reference. “But I can not take upon myself to let you in. I will go and tell Jesus Christ about your arrival. We shall see what He will say about it.”

Our Lord hearing the news came to the gate of Paradise, where He found Federigo kneeling at the gate with his twelve souls, six on each side. Then allowing Himself to be moved with compassion:

“Thou mayest pass,” he said to Federigo, “but these twelve souls whom hell claims, I could not in all conscience allow them to pass.”

“What, my Lord,” said Federigo, “when I had the honor of receiving Thee in my house wert Thou not accompanied by twelve travellers whom I received with Thee, with all the hospitality that I could show.”

“Really, one cannot resist this man,” said Jesus Christ. “Come in, then, since ye are all here: but boast not of this favor I have shown. It would really be too bad a precedent.”