

The Tale of the Golden Cockerel

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In country far, and days long gone,
There lived a famous Tsar — Dadon.
When young, his strength was held in awe
By all his neighbours: he made war
Whenever he declared it right.

With age, he grew less keen to fight,
Desiring his deserved peace: Struggle should stop; war's clamour cease.

His down-trod neighbours saw their chance,
And armed with dagger, sword and lance,
Attacked his frontiers at will,
Making the old Tsar maintain still
An army of twelve thousand men,
With horses, weaponry, and then
Appoint highly-paid generals
To guard the kingdom's threatened walls.

But, when they watched the west, 'twas sure
The eastern border, less secure
Would be where hostile troops appeared,
The danger greatest where least feared.
Eastward the generals sally forth,
Only to find that now the north
Border is where the danger lies.
Tormented thus, Tsar Dadon cries
Hot tears of rage. He cannot sleep.
O'er land foes stream; then from the deep.
What is life worth, when so assailed?

So, desperate, Dadon availed
Himself of magic, turning to
A sorcerer (and eunuch, too),
Interpreter of omens, stars,
Bird-flights, and such particulars.
The courtier, sent to call the sage,
Implied there'd be a handsome wage.

Arrived at court, the wise old man
Disclosed with confidence his plan:
The golden cockerel he drew
Out from his bag by magic knew
Who would attack, and when, and where,
Enabling generals to prepare.

“Just watch and listen,” said the sage.
Dadon responded: “I engage,
If this be so, to grant as fee
Whatever you request of me.
So, set the cock, as weather-vane
Upon the highest spire. Remain
Watchful, attentive; he will show
You when to arm, and where to go.
Superior intelligence
Will always be the best defense.”

And so it proves: whenever threats
Appear, the faithful sentry sets
His crimson crest in that direction
Whence comes th’incipient insurrection.
“Kiri-ku-ku,” he cries, “Hear me,
And rule long years, from worry free.”
Discovered once, and caused to flee,
Then thrice more routed, th’enemy
Lose heart, respect again the will
Of Tsar Dadon, their master still.

A year so passes, then one more.
Dadon expects another score.
One dawn however, courtiers wake
The Tsar, pale-faced, with hearts a-quake:
“The cockerel, Lord, calls you to arms.
Protect us, holy Tsar, from harms.”
Dadon, half-sleeping, asks: “What? What?”

Have you your manners quite forgot?"
"Forgive us, but the cock," they say,
Is adamant, brooks no delay."
The people panic. Only you
Can their else-mut'nous fears subdue.

Rousing himself, old Tsar Dadon
Declares he'll send his elder son
Southward, whose army shall repel
The foe which that true cockerel
Has there disclosed. "Now back to bed
"The enemy's as good as dead."
The Tsar proclaims, "I too retire.
Fear not. My spy's still on his spire."

Wars oft entail a news black-out:
Was there a victory? Or rout?
Who has prevailed? How stands the score
Of dead? And were ours less or more
Than theirs? No word for seven days
The Court's disquietude allays.

Then, on the eighth, the cockerel's
Loud cry the peace again dispels.
This time his crimson comb points north.
Dadon ordains to sally forth
His younger son, leading a force,
So rich in armour, men and horse,
That no known foe could fail to yield,
Such weapons Dadon's troops now wield.

They march; are gone. Silence profound
Envelops them, as though the ground
Had opened, as it did in truth,
To swallow up all Hamlin's youth
When its authorities displayed
Indiff'rence to a promise made.

Ill omen! For another week
The golden cock's sharp close-clamped beak
Swings slowly round, clock-wise; and then
Swings just as slowly back again.
But, when the eighth day dawns, the bird
Crows the alarm. Grim-faced, a third
Army the Tsar himself leads out.
Ahead, a solitary scout,
Follows the blood-red setting sun.
Dadon's last campaign has begun.
Long nights and days the soldiers march:
Frost cramps their feet; then hot winds parch
Their throats. They seek, but find no trace
Of battles, of the bloody chase
Of fugitives, of funeral mounds.
No rallying cries, no trumpet's sounds
Waft to the ears of Tsar Dadon,
As puzzled, tired, he trudges on.

Just when he's topped a mountain pass,
Descending valley-ward,... alas!
What frightful vision lies before
Him: scattered round a silken tent
Lie those two armies Dadon sent
In his defence. Now all are dead;
And his two sons, unhelmeted,
Hold swords plunged in each other's breast,
Hatred in four glazed eyes expressed.

Oh, my dear children! Who has snared
My falcons? What magician dared
Villainy in their hearts to stir,
To make of each a murderer?
His soldiers raise such grievous groan
It seems the very mountains moan. But then the curtains of the tent
Are flung aside. The hands that rent

Them, diamond-ringed and braceleted,
The stately figure, noble head,
Royalty's redolence express..
A Shamakhanskaya Princess
She is, who sees Dadon, and smiles.
Her beck'ning finger so beguiles
Him that, bewitched, his sons forgot
The Tsar accepts his destined lot:
Her rule, indeed her domination.

He walks, surrendering his nation,
Into the silken-wall'ed tent,
Wherein his next eight nights are spent
In (who can doubt?) those rites of passion
To detail which is out of fashion,
Feasting 'tween-times on everything
Our chefs declare «fit for a king».

At last begins the homeward course.
The maiden, mounted on his horse,
Caresses the still-love-sick Tsar.
The soldiers grumble; yet they are
Eager to tell their waiting friends
(With what imagination lends
Their memories) fantastic stuff
And nonsense. Sure, they've seen enough!

Rumours have reached the capital
Before them. At its drawbridge, all
The people wait in trepidation
To see the ruler of the nation
Approaching with his new consort,
Of whom men variously report
She is a witch, a whore, a queen.
Never before have such things been.

They greet their Tsar. His grave salute
Befits his rank; but his acute
Eye has detected in the crowd
That eunuch-sage whose cockerel's loud
Uproar had saved the threatened state.
"Approach, old man," Dadon invites,
"I grant whatever gift requites
You for your golden cockerel
Whose sentry-duty served so well."

"I just desire," the wizard says,
The Shamakhanskaya Princess.
Come now, my lady, we must leave."
Th'astonished Tsar cannot believe
His ears. "What? what? Take my princess?
And you a eunuch! I confess
I never heard a better joke.
But seriously, when I spoke
Of paying you right handsomely
I also meant in reason. See,
I'll give you half my treasury;
A lordship; and, if lechery
Indeed attracts you, all the whores
Whom you can satisfy."

With force
The wizard answers: "Satisfied
I'll be only with her as bride.
Give me the Shamakhan Princess.
I'll be content with nothing less."
"Take nothing then," Tsar Dadon said.
His sword-swipe smote the old man dead.
The crowd was dumbstruck; but the maid,
By this aggression undismayed,
Burst out in laughter, peal on peal,
As though by laughing to reveal

Her full involvement in the plan
To trick and then destroy a man.

The Tsar, though startled, deigns to smile.
Then on, along the Royal Mile.

The crowd begins a careful cheer,
Until a whir of wings they hear
And see a bird with lance-like beak,
A golden bird, with feathers sleek,
Dive at the Tsar, piercing his head.
Dadon groans once, falls, and is dead.

Where's she who was to be his queen?
Vanished, as though she'd never been.

The story's false; but in it lies
Some truth, seen but by inward eyes.