

The Golden Cockerel

Sometime long, long ago,
in a kingdom you wouldn't know,
lived Tsar Dadon the Glorious
who began his reign in a notorious
way by invading his neighbors,
destroying their homes and their labors.
Later, though, nearing old age
his life entered a new phase,
and the tsar wanted peace.
But now his enemies unleashed
barrage of their own attacks.
The tsar was hardly able to relax
before he needed to protect his borders
from the armies and marauders.



A fine war machine he did preserve
and his generals would serve
him well, but now he would need
an astute strategy to succeed.
You see, if his army guarded the south,
the foe took an eastern route.
Defend that flank, and the next guest
would emerge from the sea. Never a rest!

In private the tsar would weep,
cutting into his dignity, and his sleep.
In such fear, it's hardly a life,
so he turned to another for advice.
He summoned an old soothsayer,
a eunuch, an astrologer,
and sent a courier to get the man.
Soon the eunuch arrived, and with great elan,
lifted from a sack a cockerel of gold.
To the tsar this is what he told:

"On a high spire place this bird
so he can be seen and heard.
There my cockerel, golden from head to tail,
will help protect the city without fail.

If things are quiet for miles around
the rooster will sit quietly, not a sound.
But if unwelcome strangers do appear,
if the horror of war approaches near,
then the bird will size up the enemy force,
and map out its expected course.
Boldly the rooster
will cry out, flutter
its wings, stiffen its red comb,
eyes fixed on the danger, away from home."

The tsar, elated, bid the sage farewell,
promising to fulfill
any desire the man might have.
The sage was quiet, call it savvy,
as he would wait for events to unfold,
while dreaming of fortunes untold.

And so the cockerel from his high perch,
for the enemy would diligently search.
The minute he sensed danger,
like a trustworthy farm rooster
at daybreak, he would come to life. Turning
in that direction, while confirming
his suspicions, he'd cry, "Kiri-ku-ku!
Careful, they are coming for you!"

Soon the enemies day and night
lost their will to fight.
Their forces, regardless of number,
by Dadon were ripped asunder.
Two years passed in peace,
and the cockerel stood at ease.
Then the tsar was awakened from his sleep
by loud voices and shuffling feet.

"Sir! Father of our nation!"
began a general's exclamation.
"Sir, wake up! There's trouble!"
"What is it, people?"
the tsar said, breaking a yawn.
"What's the matter? What's wrong?"
"Sir, the bird has a threat in focus.
He's giving us notice

that evil winds are blowing near.
People are on edge, our fate's unclear."

The tsar looked at the agitated bird,
and saw that it was pointed eastward.
"Hurry, no time to waste!
To your horses! Make haste!"
The tsar sent an army to the east,
his oldest son he chose to lead.
The cockerel soon stood quietly,
and Dadon waited patiently
in the solemn city. Soon came day eight,
still no news on the army's fate.
If a savage battle occurred,
would he have heard?

Then the cockerel cried out again,
and the tsar rounded up more men.
He sent his other son--he had but two--
to investigate and perhaps rescue
his first brave unit. The cockerel
quieted again and time crawled
in the city for the next eight days,
people worried, their thoughts strayed.

Then the rooster cried out again.
The tsar ordered a third set of men
and led it himself to the east,
uncertain if he could help in the least.
Traveling day and night,
his army tired quickly. Neither a fight,
nor camps, nor battlefields,
nor burial mounds in hills
did Dadon and his troops encounter.
"What's going on?" he would wonder.

Now it was the eighth day ahead,
and into the hills the army was led.
Between two majestic hills,
the verdant meadow seemed unduly still.
Further down, a silk tent was seen.
And in a tight ravine ...
lay the tsar's first two armies, perished.

To the tent Dadon rushed
and witnessed a sight he feared:
at the door, his two sons dear,
without their helmets or armor,
lay motionless, not a stir.
Each had driven a lethal blade
into the other. Their horses in the glade,
meanwhile, roamed on trampled grass,
over blood-stained sward they'd pass.
The tsar wailed, "Oh, the horror!
My sons! Both my warriors
caught in a trap. Oh, the misery!
Death come soon unto me!"

Everyone grieved behind the tsar.
Hills and valleys, near and far,
it seemed, with pent
up sorrow moaned, as well. Suddenly the tent
opened ... and a stunning beauty was seen.
Her name was the Shamakha Queen.
Her radiance, like the new day's dawn,
quietly wrapped itself around Dadon.
Like a nightbird's song is stifled by sunrise,
the tsar was speechless, peering into her eyes.
It was here he forgot at once
the tragic death of his two sons.

She led the tsar inside the tent
of silk. Her skin's sweet scent,
her bewitching smile, her figure's allure,
were heaven-sent, the tsar was sure.
At the table she gave him a seat,
the finest food she served to eat.
On a brocade bed he rested,
captured by her beauty, arrested
by her charm. For a week exactly
he was hers completely, seemingly
trapped under the maiden's spell.
And he feasted like a king, as well!
Eventually, though, he needed to go back
to his kingdom. So with the army intact,
they returned to their more familiar haven,
together with the lovely young maiden.

Truths and falsehoods were rife
as the city before them sprang to life.
In their carriages, Dadon and the queen
were followed by the masses. What a scene!
Dadon greeted all, even tossed
a few coins to the crowd. Then he noticed
a man with a strange hat on.

It was the eunuch. "Welcome, Tsar Dadon!"
to his majesty the sage bellowed.
"Ah, greetings my dear fellow,"
the tsar replied, "what do you say?
Can I throw a little your way?"
"Yes, sir," replied the wise man.
"Indeed, it is time to settle the best we can.
Remember you said you'd acquire
and grant me anything I desire.
Well, there is something I've seen.
I want her, the Shamakha Queen!"

The tsar was shocked.
"Surely you jest," he mocked.
"Has the devil gotten to you?
How could such thoughts accrue
in your head?! I gave you my word,
of course, but such rubbish I've never heard.
Your request needs to be within reason.
And why the maiden?
Is this some kind of test?
From you I'd take almost any request.
Take money, or the title of a noble.
Take a horse from the royal stable.
Take half my empire."
"My dear tsar, all I desire
is the maiden I've seen,
the Shamakha Queen."

The tsar spat in disgust.
"Such evil, this is hardly fitting. Enough!
You won't receive a thing,
sinner, except for perhaps suffering.
Be off! Take the old goat away.
You're lucky you're still alive today."
The old man started to argue,

but such acts you don't do
with the tsar, who hit him with his staff
across the lips; the eunuch fell flat.

He died on the spot, before a whole city
shuddering. But the beauty
seemed to giggle at the whole affair;
the sage's fate, she didn't care.
The tsar, although shaken,
looked lovingly at the maiden.
They began to head towards town,
when from above they heard a faint sound.

The whole capital looked on
as the cockerel headed toward Dadon.
Like a shot he flew down,
landing on the tsar's crown.
He fluttered wildly, pecking into his head,
and flew off ... It can be said
that from the carriage the tsar fell.
Exactly what killed him, no one could tell.
Mysteriously, the queen disappeared.
It's as if she were never here.

-- Poem by Russian Poet Aleksander Pushkin