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“TALE OF THE GOLDEN COCKEREL”

by Alexander Pushkin

TALE OF THE GOLDEN COCKEREL

Once—in Kingdom Twenty-Seven
Or the Realm of Thrice Eleven—
Somewhere—reigned a tsar, Dodon,
Terrible and famous, known
From his youth for rashly wronging
All his neighbours. He was longing,
Now that age was creeping close,
To make sure of his repose
And relax from wars and labours.
Now behold, those very neighbours
Harried him, with damage sore
To that aged emperor.
So, to hinder them from raiding
On his frontiers, and invading,
He must needs maintain a host,
Multitudes at every post.
Sleepless, still his captains waited;
Vainly!—they are still belated.
Are they watching southward? no,
From the east comes down the foe.
That amended—see, from ocean
Those untoward guests in motion!
Tsar Dodon can only weep
Tears of rage, and lose his sleep.
What is life, in such conditions
Of disquiet? He petitions
Next for aid an eunuch sage,
Both astrologer and mage.
Couriers fly, and make obeisance;

Soon the wise man is in presence
Of Dodon; and from his poke
Out he pulls a Golden Cock,
Saying, "Take this fowl, and set him
On a perch aloft; and let him,
This my Golden Cockerel,
Be your trusty sentinel.
He, when all is peace about you,
Shall sit still; but never doubt you
That the moment from afar
Comes the least surmise of war
Or incursion, to beset you,
Mischief unforeknown, to threat you,
Then my Cockerel instantly
Shall perk up his comb on high
Veering towards the danger, shuffling,
Crowing, and his feathers ruffling."
Then his thanks the emperor told
To the eunuch; piles of gold
Proffered, rapt in admiration;
Cried, "For such an obligation,
Shall the earliest wish of thine
Be fulfilled, as though 'twere mine!"

So the Cock became the warder,
Perched on high, of every border.
If that faithful watcher e'er
Noted peril anywhere,
He, as though from sleep awaking,
Veered towards it, shuffling, shaking;
And "Kiri-ku-ku! " he said;

“Rule them, as you lie abed!”
And those neighbours soon were quiet,
Had no heart for war or riot,
When the tsar on every hand
Made so resolute a stand.

This year flies, and then another.
Cock sits quiet, makes no pother.
But one day a monstrous noise
Tsar Dodon’s repose destroys.
“Father of thy people! master!
Rouse thee, sire! Behold disaster!”
Thus aloud the captain cries.
Through his yawns the tsar replies:
“Eh, who’s there? what is it, say you,
Sirs? and what disaster, pray you?”
Says the captain, “Noise and fear
Fill thy capital; we hear
Once again the Cockerel crowing.”
And the emperor, quickly going
To his window, sees the beast
Flapping, turning to the east.
“Not the time to loiter! hurry,
All to horse! and all men, scurry!”
Off his elder son is sent
Eastward, with an armament.
Then the Cock gives over flapping.
All is peace. The tsar lies napping.
Eight days pass; but not a word
Of that army has been heard.
Has it fought, or not? No message

Comes unto Dodon. In presage
Yet again Cockerel crows
Out a second muster goes,
And the tsar sends forth the other
Son, to aid his elder brother.
Silent is the Cock once more.
Still no tidings; as before,
Eight days pass; and all the nation
Lives them through in consternation.
Now again the crow is heard!
And the tsar conducts a third
Muster eastward, never knowing
What may be the good of going.

Night and day those troops marched on
Till their strength was all but gone;
And the emperor, never sighting
Any camp, or field of fighting,
Or sepulchral barrow, thought,
“How is such a wonder wrought?”
Even with the eighth day’s ending
With his host he was ascending
Lofty mountains. In their heart
Stood a silken tent apart
With a magic silence round it.
Near, an army lay; he found it
In a narrow gorge, all dead.
To the tent the monarch sped,
There a dreadful scene descrying:
Both his sons before him lying
Lifeless, mail and helmet gone,

And the weapon of each one
Through the other's body. Yonder
In the mead their horses wander
On the trampled turf, and pass
Through the blood-besprinkled grass.
Then the tsar, with anguish shaken,
Moaned, "Ah, woe! my children taken,
Both our falcons snared! and I—
It is time for me to die."
And they all took up his moaning,
And a slow and heavy groaning
Pierced the vales, and quivers went
Through the hills. But swift the tent
Parted wide; and thence, all splendid
As the dawn, a maid descended
—Queen of Shamakhan was she—
Softly to the tsar; and he,
Mute, like owl by sunshine blinded,
Gazed into her eyes, nor minded
In her presence both his sons
Lying dead. But she at once
Smiled on tsar Dodon, and to him
Curtseyed deep, and took and drew him
By the hand, and made him go
Into her own tent; and so
To a table next she led him,
And on many dainties fed him;
Bade him rest, and saw him laid
On a bed of rich brocade.
There, for just a week, beglamoured
And enchanted and enamoured,

Tsar Dodon with her made feast,
Her obedient slave and guest.

Now at last Dodon is speeding
Back, his valiant army leading;
Turns his steps to home again,
With the lady in his train.
Rumour runs before him, crying
Sometimes truth, and often lying.
Near the city gates the throng
By the chariot rush along,
Noisily the empress meeting
And the tsar, who gives his greeting
Unto all; but quickly he
In the crowd a head doth see
Grey as any swan's, and on it
Is a Saracen white bonnet.
'Tis the eunuch, his old friend!
"Ha, good father! heaven send
Health to thee; how now, come nigher;
Tell us, what is thy desire!"
Said the wise man: "Now at last,
Tsar, our long account we cast.
Mind'st thou, for my service, making
Once a friendly undertaking
That the earliest wish of mine
Should be granted, as 'twere thine?
Queen of Shamakhan."

In the wonder
Stood the tsar, and thus spoke he:
"Ancient, what hath taken thee?"

Some possession of the devil?
Hast thou lost thy wits? what evil
Fancy entered thy head?
There are bounds, when all is said,
Though I made the promise duly.
What to thee are maidens, truly?
Peace, enough. For dost thou know
Who I am? I will bestow
Title of boyar, or treasure,
Or a war-horse, at thy pleasure,
From our stables. Thou canst have
Half my kingdom." — "Nought I crave;
Give me nothing but lady,
Queen of Shamakhan." So prayed he;
Ever thus the sage replied.
But the tsar, he spat, and cried,
"What, so bold? then nought thou gainest,
Sinner! thus thyself thou painest;
Go, with bones unbroken still;
Drag him hence! It is my will."
Then the old man fell to wrangling;
But, with certain people, jangling
Pays not; for the sceptre now
Caught him just upon the brow.
Flat he fell, and life departed.
All the city shuddered, started.
Cried the maid, "Ho ho! He he!
Here's a fearless sinner, see!"
And, though sore perturbed, a tender
Smile the tsar contrived to send her.
Then he rode within the town.

But there came a rustle down,
And the city stared affrighted;
For the Cock flew forth, alighted,
Winging straightway to the car,
On the skull of that great tsar;
Flapped, and gave one peck, and flitted
Upward; and, as earth he quitted,
From the chariot dropt Dodon,
Dying with a single groan.
And, as thought that queen had never
Lived, she vanished, and for ever.
Though my story is not true,
'Tis a lesson, lads, to you.