



# *The Golden Cockerel*

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Russian

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*Easy*  
*7 min read*

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  
Indifference 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.

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