

IX

Melito's Story — The Cock, the Angel, and the Eagle

“Once not very long ago and not very far from the place where I was born, there was a fine farm. It was especially noted for its poultry: flocks of ducks white as snow, geese nearly as large as swans and so fat they could scarcely walk, and chickens that were as colourful as parrots. The farmer who had built up this place had a great many strange ideas about farming, but he had succeeded so much better with his strange ideas than any of his neighbours with their sensible ones, that few had the courage to tell him what a fool he was.

“One of his queer notions concerned the management of his chickens. Everyone knows that when chicks are observed to be little cocks they must be caponized. Only one cock is required in the barnyard, and two will fight.

“But this farmer saved himself all that trouble. ‘Let them grow up,’ he said. ‘Let them fight, and let me tell you something, neighbour. The best and cockiest cock will win, and he is the one who will sire many more chicks to swell my flock. What’s more, his chicks will be the hardest, and the best suited to throwing off every disease—when your chickens are wiped out, you can come to me and I’ll sell you some breeding stock at my own price. As for the beaten cocks, my family and I can eat them. There’s no capon so tender as a cock that has been fought to death, just as the best beef comes from a bull that has died in the bull ring and the best venison from a stag the hounds have run all day. Besides, eating capons saps a man’s virility.’

“This odd farmer also believed that it was his duty to select the worst bird from his flock whenever he wanted one for dinner. ‘It is impious,’ he said, “for anyone to take the best. They should be left to prosper under the eye of the Pancreator, who made cocks and hens as well as men and women. Perhaps because he felt as he did, his flock was so good that it seemed sometimes there was no worst among it.

“From all I have said, it will be clear that the cock of this flock was a very fine

one. He was young, strong, and brave. His tail was as fine as the tails of many sorts of pheasants, and no doubt his comb would have been fine too, save that it had been torn to ribbons in the many desperate combats that had won him his place. His breast was of glowing scarlet like the Pelerines' robes here—but the geese said it had been white before it was dyed in his own blood. His wings were so strong that he was a better flier than any of the white ducks, his spurs were longer than a man's middle finger and his bill was as sharp as my sword.

"This fine cock had a thousand wives, but the darling of his heart was a hen as fine as he, the daughter of a noble race and the acknowledged queen of all the chickens for leagues around. How proudly they walked between the corner of the barn and the water of the duck pond! You could not hope to see anything finer, no, not if you saw the Autarch himself showing off his favourite at the Well of Orchids—the more so since the Autarch is a capon, as I hear it.

"Everything was bugs for breakfast for this happy pair until one night the cock was wakened by a terrible row. A great, eared owl had broken into the barn where the chickens roosted and was making his way among them as he sought for his dinner. Of course he seized upon the hen who was the particular favourite of the cock; and with her in his claws, he spread his wide, silent wings to sail away. Owls can see marvelously well in the dark, and so he must have seen the cock flying at him like a feathered fury. Who has ever seen an amazed expression on the face of an owl? Yet surely there was one on that owl in the barn that night. The cock's spurs shuffled faster than the feet of any dancer, and his bill struck for those round and shining eyes as the bill of a woodpecker hammers the trunk of a tree. The owl dropped the hen, flew from the barn, and was never seen again.

"No doubt the cock had a right to be proud, but he became too proud. Having defeated an owl in the dark, he felt he could defeat any bird, anywhere. He began to talk of rescuing the prey of hawks and bullying the teratornis, the largest and most terrible bird that flies. If he had surrounded himself with wise counselors, particularly the llama and the pig, those whom most princes choose to help guide their affairs, I feel sure his extravagances would soon have been effectively though courteously checked. Alas, he did not do so. He listened only to the hens, who were all infatuated with him, and to the geese and ducks, who felt that as his fellow barnyard fowl they shared to some extent in whatever glory he won. At last the day came, as it always does for those who show too much pride, when he went too far.

"It was sunrise, ever the most dangerous time for those who do not do well. The cock flew up and up and up, until beseeemed about to pierce the sky, and at last, at the very apogee of his flight, perched himself atop the weathervane on the loftiest gable of the barn—the highest point in the entire farmyard. There as the sun drove out the shadows with lashes of crimson and gold, he screamed again and again that he was lord of all feathered things. Seven times he crowed so, and he might have got

away with it, for seven is a lucky number. But he could not be content with that. An eighth time he made the same boast, and then flew down.

“He had not yet landed among his flock when there began a most marvelous phenomenon high in the air, directly above the barn. A hundred rays of sunlight seemed to tangle themselves as a kitten snarls a ball of wool, and to roll themselves together as a woman rolls up dough in a kneading pan. This collection of glorious light then put out legs, arms, a head, and at last wings, and swooped down upon the barnyard. It was an angel with wings of red and blue and green and gold, and though it seemed no bigger than the cock, he knew as soon as he had looked into its eyes that it was far larger on the inside than he.

“‘Now,’ said the angel, ‘hear justice. You claim that no feathered thing can stand against you. Here am I, plainly a feathered thing. All the mighty weapons of the armies of light I have left behind, and we will wrestle, we two.’”

“At that the cock spread his wings and bowed so low that his tattered comb scraped the dust. ‘I shall be honoured to the end of my days to have been thought worthy of such a challenge,’ he said, ‘which no other bird has ever received before. It is with the most profound regret that I must tell you I cannot accept, and that for three reasons, the first of which is that though you have feathers on your wings, as you say, it is not against your wings that I would fight but against your head and breast. Thus you are not a feathered creature for the purposes of combat’”

“The angel closed his eyes and touched his hands to his own body, and when he drew them away the hair of his head had become feathers brighter than the feathers of the finest canary, and the linen of his robe had become feathers whiter than the feathers of the most brilliant dove.”

“‘The second of which,’ continued the cock, nothing daunted, ‘is that you, having, as you so clearly do, the power to transform yourself, might choose during the course of our combat to change yourself into some creature that does not possess feathers—for example, a large snake. Thus if I were to fight you, I should have no guarantee of fair play.’”

“At that, the angel tore open his breast, and displaying all the qualities therein to the assembled poultry, took out his ability to alter his shape. He handed it to the fattest goose to hold for the duration of the match, and the goose at once transformed himself, becoming a grey salt goose, such as stream from pole to pole. But he did not fly off, and he kept the angel’s ability safe.”

“‘The third of which,’ continued the cock in desperation, ‘is that you are clearly an officer in the Pancreator’s service, and in prosecuting the cause of justice, as you do, are doing your duty. If I were to fight you as you ask, I should be committing a grave crime against the only ruler brave chickens acknowledge.’”

“‘Very well,’ said the angel, ‘It is a strong legal position, and I suppose you think you’ve won your way free. The truth is that you have argued your way to your own

death. I was only going to twist your wings back a bit and pull out your tail feathers.' Then he lifted his head and gave a strange, wild cry. Immediately an eagle dove from the sky and dropped like a thunderbolt into the barnyard."

"All around the barn they fought, and beside the duck pond, and across the pasture and back, for the eagle was very strong, but the cock was quick and brave. There was an old cart with a broken wheel leaning against one wall of the barn, and under it, where the eagle could not fly at him from above and he could cool himself somewhat in the shadow, the cock sought to make his final stand. He was bleeding so much, however, that before the eagle, who was almost as bloodied as he, could come at him there, he tottered, fell, tried to rise, and fell again."

"'Now,' said the angel, addressing all the assembled birds, 'you have seen justice done. Be not proud! Be not boastful, for surely retribution will be visited upon you. You thought your champion invincible. There he lies, the victim not of this eagle but of pride, beaten and destroyed.'"

"Then the cock, whom they had all thought dead, lifted his head. 'You are doubtless very wise. Angel,' he said. 'But you know nothing of the ways of cocks. A cock is not beaten until he turns tail and shows the white feather that lies beneath his tail feathers. My strength, which I made myself by flying and running, and in many battles, has failed me. My spirit, which I received from the hand of your master the Pancreator, has not failed me. Eagle, I ask no quarter from you. Come here and kill me now. But as you value your honour, never say that you have beaten me.'"

"The eagle looked at the angel when he heard what the cock said, and the angel looked at the eagle. 'The Pancreator is infinitely far from us,' the angel said. 'And thus infinitely far from me, though I fly so much higher than you. I guess at his desires—no one can do otherwise.'"

He opened his chest once more and replaced the ability he had for a time surrendered. Then he and the eagle flew away, and for a time the salt goose followed them. That is the end of the story."

Melito had lain upon his back as he spoke, looking up at the canvas stretched overhead. I had the feeling he was too weak even to raise himself on one elbow. The rest of the wounded had been as quiet for his story as for Hallvard's.

At last I said, "That is a fine tale. It will be very hard for me to judge between the two, and if it is agreeable to you and Hallvard, and to Foila, I would like to give myself time to think about them both."

Foila, who was sitting up with her knees drawn under her chin, called, "Don't judge at all. The contest isn't over yet." Everyone looked at her.

"I'll explain tomorrow," she said. "Just don't judge, Severian. But what did you think of that story?"

Hallvard rumbled, "I will tell you what I think. I think Melito is clever the way he claimed I was. He is not so well as I am, not so strong, and in this way he has

drawn a woman's sympathy to himself. It was cunningly done, little cock."

Melito's voice seemed weaker than it had while he was recounting the battle of the birds. "It is the worst story I know."

"The worst?" I asked. We were all surprised.

"Yes, the worst. It is a foolish tale we tell our little children, who know nothing but the dust and the farm animals and the sky they see above them. Surely every word of it must make that clear."

Hallvard asked, "Don't you want to win, Melito?"

"Certainly I do. You don't love Foila as I love her. I would die to possess her, but I would sooner die than disappoint her. If the story I have just told can win, then I shall never disappoint her, at least with my stories. I have a thousand that are better than that."

Hallvard got up and came to sit on my cot as he had the day before, and I swung my legs over the edge to sit beside him. To me he said, "What Melito says is very clever. Everything he says is very clever. Still, you must judge us by the tales we told, and not by the ones we say we know but did not tell. I, too, know many other stories. Our winter nights are the longest in the Commonwealth."

I answered that according to Foila, who had originally thought of the contest and who was herself the prize, I was not yet to judge at all.

The Ascian said, "All who speak Correct Thought speak well. Where then is the superiority of some students to others? It is in the speaking. Intelligent students speak Correct Thought intelligently. The hearer knows by the intonation of their voices that they understand. By this superior speaking of intelligent students. Correct Thought is passed, like fire, from one to another."

I think that none of us had realized he was listening. We were all a trifle startled to hear him speak now. After a moment, Foila said, "He means you should not judge by the content of the stories, but by how well each was told. I'm not sure I agree with that—still, there may be something in it."

"I do not agree," Hallvard grumbled. "Those who listen soon tire of storyteller tricks. The best telling is the plainest."

Others joined in the argument, and we talked about it and about the little cock for a long time.