

## The Cockerel of Good Report

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It was in those long ago days when the river Danuta flowed between the Mountains of Gloom on the west and the Mountains of Snow on the east that an egg was laid in a clutch.

The hen who laid this egg was not ordinary, indeed, for this was the famous Snowbell, a hen of such refined beauty she was sought the county 'round by each rooster. Legend says that Snowbell was descended from the great Elora, the Oracular Hen of County Farrow, and that Elora's wisdom expressed itself in her descendant's beauty. Snowbell's fame extended even to the great grain fields of Appelonia, where her name is still sung in the early days of winter.

Yet even more famous was her son, hatched of that very named egg, in that very clutch: Aart, the Cockerel of Good Report.

The hatching of the egg appeared unremarkable to those who observed. Surely, the Farmer watched Snowbell closely, knowing that her contentment meant much to him and the fortunes of his heirs.

Within the egg, Aart's first battle lines were drawn. Against the terrible pressure of the shell, and motivated by hunger and thirst, the chick began his struggle. Writhing, moving, finally settling upon pecking as the form of attack his instincts dictated, Aart struggled with might and mien to crack the confines of his shell. Finally a peck of desperation accomplished his goal and

the first sweet sips of spring air reached his lungs! Another hour's wriggling against the shape of his erstwhile prison and lo! Art was freed. He stood upon his two nearly-sturdy legs and surveyed the world with wide eyes.

His sisters fought bravely as well to begin their new lives in strength, breathing deep gasps of the sweet morning and reaching, ever reaching for independence.

The next enemy was the cold - for while the sweet air brought its goodness to his lungs, it chilled his muscles and slowed the flow of his humours. Warmth, then, was needed. Warmth to dry the wetness of his feathers, to stir his blood, to refresh his muscles.

And in that hour, it was Snowbell, famed beauty, hen worthy of princes' feasts, who came into her own mothering instincts. She provided the needful warmth even from the heat of her own body, generated by the good corn of the fertile valley in which they habited. Aart sought his mother, found her, and ran to the cave of hen-down and straw formed by her underside and the roost, therein to seek comfort and rest

And so, his First Great Challenge and his First Great Quest Aart successfully assayed, and his life truly began.

The spring months were kind to him! Aart grew in height and bulk, in muscle and feather, and that bright morning on the eve of Lugnased, when first he noticed his plumes of adulthood, his heart swelled!



Good Reader, let this begin our weeping and wailing! Let us gnash our teeth and cry our, “Beware! Beware! Oh, Aart!” For it is true that in the moment of this notice, our hero began down a crooked path of folly. In the moment that he noticed his plumes of adulthood, our good Aart committed the sin of Vanity. And that first inkling of Vanity stained his young heart, like ink spreading spilled across the blank page, forever destroying the tale which might have been.

The Vanity caused him to preen and to peck and to strut, and all that morning, each denizen and neighbor of the henhouse was called upon to admire and comment.

First of all his mother, herself famed for beauty, was called upon as the witness to his glorious new feathers. “Green and gold,” she called them, “like morning in summer!”

Next his sisters, themselves less appreciative of his beauty, must be pecked and chased until they admitted that none of them had a cock-tail a’coming and that his plumage glistened in the sun.

The sheep, the geese, the tiny grey mice, each were visited and harangued until favorable comment came forth in praise of the plumes and of the cockerel upon whose buttock they grew.

Morning transitioned to bright and glorious noontime, and Aart began to peck at his grain in what he hoped was the most flattering angle to display the phosphorescence in his tail feathers to best advantage.

Finally with a full belly and his highlight glinting just so, Aart settled in to scratch.

“So fine!” a soft voice glided out from the direction of the old stone wall. “Such glister and shine!”

Aart turned his head, and picking up his feet particularly high, he stepped closer.

“Oh, look how he turns in the sun!” the voice continued.

Eager to hear each syllable of this mysterious whisper, Aart strode nearer.

“And well-muscled, too, I daresay,” the voice seemed to flow out from the very stones themselves. “Is he strong?”

Gentle Reader, I must admit that Aart may, in fact, have strutted at this point. He spread his wings and flapped, demonstrated the vigor of wind which he could raise.

“Strong, indeed!” said the voice, “but is he swift as well?”

Keeping his head turned as if he had not heard a word, Aart spotted a grub at three fathoms’ distance. Running to spear the grub, he pumped his legs as he seldom did, reaching for his top speed. He quickly dispatched that unfortunate individual of the family Scarabaeoidea and turned, the better to show his handsome head to the unknown admirer.

No word but a gasp came from the wall, and Aart strutted again to what he considered the best exhibition point from the perspective of his admirer’s vantage.

“I wonder!” whispered the voice. “Is it possible?” wondered the voice.

“What do you wonder?” cried Aart in his excitement, turning and running to the wall. “What else I can do? I can scratch and play! I can cluck and beat my sisters with my wings!” To his shame, the sin of Vanity had opened a floodgate, and now a Lie escaped his beak - “I can even crow!” - and he cast back his head and spread his wings in order to demonstrate that skill which he had never before attempted!

But the voice cut him off immediately, “No!”

Aart stopped, mid-pose, and stared.

“You must not crow before your full maturity is gained! That precious voice, so vital to the workings of this farm, must not be stretched, injured, or, dare we utter it, destroyed, until we celebrate the anniversary of your birth! Nay, good cockerel, do not destroy the hope of the farmer, the confidence of all these good beasts just for the sake of my curiosity, I beg you.” And

with that a slender green and gold serpent emerged sinuously from between the warm stones of the wall.

Aart was astonished to discover the nature of his admirer. Always before his mother had told him to eschew the company of the squamates which could be found in farmyard, meadow, and cultivated field. “They have nothing good to report,” she had insisted, “and will take away the eggs we lay!”

Yet this fine fellow, so alike to Aart in coloration, had not approached Aart with ill words. Nor had Aart any eggs at risk being a cockerel! Yes, this serpent could be his admirer and friend, determined the youngling, and Aart approached the beast with the open mind of offered friendship.

“Truly, you have saved my voice!” said Aart to the serpent, by way of gratitude, “for none other have given me that warning, and I might have ruined it betimes.”

“Oh, happy day that I was here, then, to prevent that sad event,” responded the serpent. “Call me Attor, your humble servant.”

Aart stepped closer still, rustling his tail feathers.

“I was actually admiring you from afar, good Cockerel! You have acquired a most noble set of plumage recently which shimmers with deep color and can only speak of magnificence to come in your later months.”

Aart tried to express humility with a deprecating gesture of bowed head and a backward step. “I thank you for your kind words, friend Attor. I am Aart.” And he let that simple but powerful syllable hang on the bright noontime air.

From this initial introduction, Good Reader, I assure you that Attor proceeded to heap praise upon Aart for his feathers, his strength and his speed. I am desolate to inform you that Aart's head was turned, his ears full of the sweet words, and this is all the explanation I can imagine for the foolishness which came next.

The sun had begun its downward course. The yard was still, and Aart, although he felt thirst for good, honest water, nonetheless stayed too long in the blaze, quenching his thirst for unearned praise.

"Beauty! Strength! Speed!" said Attor, "You surpass your famous mother, even. For while she is the Beauty of five counties, hers is not the gift of athleticism."

Aart kindly acknowledged his superiority to his mother in that realm, while admitting the beauty which gave rise to his own.

"I wonder," said Attor for the second time that day.

"What is it you wonder, good Attor?" inquired the cockerel.

The snake turned his head upon one side, as though to look upon Aart with new eyes.

"I wonder merely if you are Clever as well."

Silence hung upon the heated air.

"Clever?" asked Aart, as though tasting the newness of the word in his mouth.

"Indeed," said Attor. Suddenly shifting his eyes and turning his body away, "It was just a momentary thought I had - do not disarrange yourself at all, friend. Chickens are not

known for developing that quality; they have so many finer ones to encourage in their young. And you! You are the pinnacle of these galliform virtues!” And Attor began to slither away, a few steps toward his stone wall.

Unconscious of his steps, Aart followed him. “But why would you seek cleverness?” he asked earnestly.

Attor swished his tail dismissively. “It is something that we snakes, being so lowly and unlovely, prize among our own kind. There is a legend - but, no, we will not speak of it.”

More steps took Aart to follow the snake. “Speak, I pray you friend, for true friend you have proven to be, I would hear this legend and of this Cleverness.”

Pausing to consider and to regard the cockerel out of the corner of his eye, Attor was still a moment and then turned his face eastward along the wall. “You are right. The old stories should be told, Friend Aart. Follow on and I will tell you the tale of the Great One.” With that, the snake wriggled his lithe body and moved quickly out of the barnyard.

Struggling to keep up, Aart trotted away, all thoughts of home and family heedlessly abandoned. He moved with all the briskness he could muster, not daring to diminish his new friend’s confidence in his Speed, although the distance they covered was far greater than that to which he was used.

In time, Attor slithered up on a tall cairn, turned, and called to Aart.

“Up here, good Cockerel. Climb upon this cairn and from this place I will teach you of Cleverness!”



Aart struggled. He used his wings to maintain his balance and his feet scrabbled up the rounded stones. With great effort, he drew himself upon the high flat rock where Attor waited.

“Look,” instructed Attor.

Turning, Aart saw the ground beneath him, he saw the old stone wall reaching away to the west, and he saw his farmyard for the first time from without rather than within its safe borders.

“It is so small,” he said of his home, with a voice of shock.

“It is only one of many farms, look yonder.”

Aart looked and, sure enough, other yards dotted the green valley to east and south and west. His heart began to tremble.

“What is this?” he asked with trepidation.

“This is the beginning of Cleverness,” said Attor. “And Cleverness is the ability to do Magic!”

Magic! The word galvanized Aart’s nerves, turning anxiety to excitement again. “What is it, then, and how is it done! Oh, friend Attor, I desire of all things to be Clever!”

Attor stared with wide unblinking eyes of admiration. “That is the legend, my friend. That one who is master of Beauty, Strength, Speed, and Cleverness shall create a great Magic and unite the many farms into one Valley of Peace and Plenty.”

At a loss for words, Aart could only stare at the snake and then out into the distance.

After some minutes, he whispered, “Peace and Plenty? This whole valley? This whole world?” and the snake nodded gently.

“Only a legend, we thought until now. We snake people tell stories in the evenings, you know, and this is one of the oldest.”

“How do I be Clever?” asked Aart. “Could I do this Magic?”

“Would you dare?” came the question on speedy tongue.

“I do! I do dare this Cleverness!” replied our foolish cockerel instantly, and in that instant the snake rushed so close to him as to almost touch snout to beak.

Attor gazed so intently upon Aart that the cockerel’s mind knew no other sensation than the presence of his friend. “Then you must attempt the greatest Cleverness, young one. You must - against your nature - lay an egg.”

The impossibility of these words sank into Aart’s understanding like sunlight into stone - slow but inexorable. “But, but...” he began to protest.

“It must be done by moonlight,” said the snake. “On this stone or similar. It must be done in hunger and thirst, for that is a great magic, too, and I will make the signs and symbols.”

“But an egg needs a roost -” Aart began.

“Fear not! I have a nest, deep and warm, I will foster the egg and you will be free to run home in fame and Cleverness.”

Aart blinked. “You will set the egg? My mother...” he tried to remember, “my mother said that snakes take eggs...”

“You see!” said the snake. “The legend lives among your people, as well! Lain by a cockerel, set by a serpent, hatched with the rising sun, will be a Great Magic. Great indeed, and you will be called the Father of Magic.”

“Father of Magic,” repeated Aart. “I will be called Father of Magic.” And his glassy eyes stared deeply into and beyond Attor’s.

“Sit here,” said the snake, “and wait for moonlight. I will make the secret symbols.”

And that is how it came to pass that Aart sat in the afternoon sun, hungry and thirsty, far from his henhouse, waiting for moonrise and Attor slithered all around him in winding and mysterious patterns understood only by the snake people.

At sunset, the snake completed his gyrations and Aart cried out in pain. “Friend!” he called. “It hurts!”

“That is the egg,” called Attor eagerly. “Huge inside you, and you will struggle in hunger and thirst to lay it!”

And those words, at least, were true. The moon rise full just a moment later, and then began the great agony of laying the egg. Writhing and crying out for comfort from his friend, Aart found none. The serpent instead circled him, hissing, watching, talking now to himself and to the egg, disregarding the struggling beast whom he had but recently called friend.

In many hours of struggle, the moon reached its height, the magical egg rolled unceremoniously onto the stone, Attor snatched it up in his coils, and slithered away out of sight.

It took more hours for Aart to revive. Indeed, Attor had left him for dead, a tool which had outlived its usefulness. Only the last warmth of the sun in the stones kept his heart beating until a soft breeze ruffled his neck feathers and he came awake. “If this is the beginning of Cleverness,” he thought to himself, “I can only think that Cleverness is part of Folly.”

Sprawled across the rock on which he had set, it took him long moments to lift his wings, roll onto his feet. With trembling muscles, he spread his wings and fluttered to the ground, dragging himself homeward along the same path he had run up earlier.

By what coincidence no fox found him - or even some great owl - I cannot tell. Only this I know, that Aart dragged himself to his coop in the small hours and lay there, warmed by his sisters and his mother, until dawn.

An explosion of sound ripped the morning asunder. Squawking, bleating, cries of all kinds rose in cacophony and all the animals rushed outside their cozy places to find the danger.

In the middle distance, a figure rose on great flame-colored wings. Larger than the horse, trailing a tail that flashed in the first rays of sun, a creature rose straight up and turned gracefully in the air. It turned its head to the farmyard and suddenly the yelling of the bull was silenced.

Aart quickly turned to look - the great beast was still, grey, and cold. The animal in the sky had turned the bull to stone.

Through the terrified barnyard came the call of the Nanny goat. "Cockatrice! Cockatrice! Do not gaze upon its eyes!"

Some foolish animals were drawn to regard it then, and were translated into stone, for the cockatrice flew straight at them. One long strafing run caused a half dozen petrifications

and complete scattering stampede. Aart found himself up against the chicken coop near the Nanny.

“What is cockatrice?” he gasped.

“Monster,” replied the goat, and then she turned to stare at him. Blood-soaked feathers, weakened stature, all this she took in with her old eyes. “It’s an impossible monster,” she continued, “born of an egg laid by a cockerel and incubated by a snake. Everyone knows that cockerels don’t lay and snakes have no warmth, so the cockatrice is impossible. It turns its prey to stone and returns later to consume all in peace.”

“Peace and plenty,” whispered Aart.

As the tumult about them continued, the goat turned stern. “Young fool! What have you done?”

He took steps backward, but the Nanny followed until he was caught between henhouse and sty.

He whispered. “I laid the egg.”

Nanny glared some more and finally shook her head.

“Death and destruction, fool, nothing but wrong comes from leaving the right order of things! Not a word now!” she interrupted as his beak began to open. “Work to do!” and with that, Nanny herded him out into the barnyard and up onto the haystack.

“What? What?” cried Aart running from Nanny’s butting head.

“Kill it,” she commanded. “The crow of the rooster kills the impossible monster.”

“The crow -” he stopped himself. “But I must not crow! It would destroy my voice! Everyone knows that I must not crow until the anniversary of my birth! I *cannot* crow, even.”

And now it was Nanny’s turn to look confused. “Must not crow? What nonsense is this? You must crow or all hope is lost!”

Aart looked deep into his mind and found what he believed. “I must not crow. The farmer - the whole farm - depends upon my voice, and I will ruin it if I crow before my time!”

“Where did you hear such nonsense?”

“I... I...” Aart stammered. “I just know it.”

The air above them swirled in mad willy-willies as the powerful winged monster returned for another run of terrifying petrifications. Now hens, and pigs and goslings fell still and cold. Only the weasels of the nearby woods and meadows defied the beast, running along the walls and chattering their defiance.

“There won’t *be* a farm, or a birth-day, for anyone at all, if you don’t crow.”

The farm. For a sudden moment, Aart recalled his view from outside, its tidy whitewashed barn, the peaceful animals dotting the hillside.

You and I know, Gentle Reader, but no other does. We know that Aart believed in his heart that he sacrificed his future vocal Beauty. The serpent had lain in his mind unshakable

belief that his voice would be ruined. And who would we be to condemn the discernment of a chicken? Rather let us praise his sacrifice and courage. For in that moment, Aart took a great gulp, raised his head and wings and crowed with all the power of his sire and grandsires, all the heart of one foolish, brave little cockerel.

The rest is a matter of the record of the county, my friend. The cockatrice that had been born at sunrise decimated the livestock of seven farms that morning, and his destruction looked to be unchecked until Aart, four-month hatchling of Snowbell, crowed from the haystack. It was a crowing that stopped the bleating and wailing of the animals all around, even of the farmers' families, for it was heard for miles. The cockatrice itself turned to stone in the air and fell, crashing to the ground with a noise like thunder, where it powdered into dust. In the days after, those animals who had been petrified were revived by a traveling cunning-woman who made a poultice of mandragora.

And from that day to this, Aart has striven for Wisdom instead of Cleverness, waking the farm at dawn, doing his duty by the farmer and his own flock of sisters, wives, and mother. His tail feathers are still beautiful, yet he is not known for them. He is known far and wide for his great crowing at the moment of despair - the Cockerel of Good Report