

# *The Cock, a very occult bird*

Dedicated to the boy who lost his best friend only to find him in his heart.



Colourful Rooster painting for my grandson Andrew



## Esoteric character of the Cock

A very occult bird, much appreciated in ancient augury and symbolism. According to the *Zohar*, the cock crows three times before the death of a person; and in Russia and all Slavonian countries whenever a person is ill on the premises where a cock is kept, its crowing is held to be a sign of inevitable death, unless the bird crows at the hour of midnight, or immediately afterwards, when its crowing is considered natural. As the cock was sacred to Æsculapius, and as the latter was called the *Sōter* (Saviour) who raised the dead to life, the Socratic exclamation “We owe a cock to Æsculapius,” just before the Sage’s death, is very suggestive. As the cock was always connected in symbology with the Sun (or solar gods), Death and Resurrection, it has found its appropriate place in the four Gospels in the prophecy about Peter repudiating his Master before the cock crowed thrice. The cock is the most magnetic and sensitive of all birds, hence its Greek name *alectryōn*.<sup>1</sup>

## Epithets of the beaming Sun–Ēlectōr (Ἠλεκτωρ)<sup>2</sup>

Alectōr (Ἀλεκτωρ),<sup>3</sup> poetical form of Alectryōn (Ἀλεκτρυων)

Ēlectrōn (Ἠλεκτρων)

Heliktōr (Ἠλικτωρ)<sup>4</sup>

All four are one and the same.<sup>5</sup>



<sup>1</sup> *Theosophical Glossary*: Cock; cf. “Alectromancy (Gr.). Divination by means of a cock, or other bird; a circle was drawn and divided into spaces, each one allotted to a letter; corn was spread over these places and note was taken of the successive lettered divisions from which the bird took grains of corn.” *Ibid*.

<sup>2</sup> See Homeric gloss. cf. Scholia to Homer, *Iliad* 6.513, where the headword appears — from the *Synagoge* (cf. e.g. Photius s.v., *Etym. Magn.* 425.31, Apoll. *Soph.* 83.20). Elsewhere this word is used to denote fire (Empedocles, 22.2).

The sun is a star shining during daytime. (Aristotle, *Topica* 142b.1-2)

The word is Ἠλεκτωρ because it is never-ceasing [ἀληκτός] and never-tiring. However, the basic meaning is “wholly spherical.” Some [authorities] derive it from the brightness of amber [Ἠλεκτρον]; or because it awakes us from sleep, [they derive it] from ἄλεκτωρ [rooster]. For this creature [is] multiply-salacious, since it awakes us from our beds [λέκτρα]. “When early-born, rosy-fingered dawn appeared, [Telemachos] rose from his bed.” (Homer, *Odyssey* 2.1-2) — *Suda*

Greek text for the above paragraph: Ἠλεκτωρ: ὁ ἥλιος. ἥλιος δὲ ἐστὶν ἄστρον ἡμεροφανές. λέγεται δὲ Ἠλεκτωρ, ὅτι ἀληκτός ἐστι καὶ ἀκάμιας. ἀλλ’ ἢ ἐτυμότης ὀλη σφαιρική. ἐνιοὶ δὲ ἀπὸ τῆς λαμπρότητος τοῦ Ἠλεκτροῦ: ἢ ὅτι ἐγείρει ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕπνου ἀπὸ τοῦ ἄλεκτορος. πολυόχευτον γὰρ τὸ ζῶον, ὅτι ἐκ τῶν λέκτρων ἡμᾶς ἐγείρει. ἡμὸς δ’ ἠριγένεια φάνη ῥοδοδάκτυλος ἠώς, ὄρνυτ’ ἄρ’ ἐξ εὐνήφιν. — *Suda* (tr. Antonella Ippolito)

<sup>3</sup> From λεκτρον (lectron), couch or bed. and privative a, i.e., sleepless, ever watchful.

<sup>4</sup> From ελισσω (helissō), to run around one self, to whirl around in a dance, of circular or spiral motion.

<sup>5</sup> Authorities consulted in preparing footnotes 2-4: [1] *Suda* (10<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine Greek historical encyclopedia), [2] Friedrich Sylburg (Ed.). *Etymologicum Magnum*. Lipsiae: Apud J.A.G. Weigel, 1816, [3] *Liddell & Scott*.

Image: Jewelled rooster holding Caduceus (1570s) by unknown Flemish Goldsmith, Galleria Palatina, Florence



## Mythology

In the tale sung by the bard in the hall of Alcinous, the Sun-God Helios once spied Ares<sup>6</sup> and Aphrodite<sup>7</sup> enjoying each other secretly in the hall of Hephaestus, and he promptly reported the incident to Aphrodite's Olympian consort. Hephaestus contrived to catch the couple in the act, and so he fashioned a net with which to snare the illicit lovers. At the appropriate time, this net was sprung, and trapped Ares and Aphrodite locked in very private embrace. But Hephaestus was not yet satisfied with his revenge — he invited the Olympian gods and goddesses to view the unfortunate pair. For the sake of modesty, the goddesses demurred, but the male gods went to witness the sight. Some commented on the beauty of Aphrodite, others remarked that they would eagerly trade places with Ares, but all mocked the two. Once the couple were loosed, Ares, embarrassed, sped away to his homeland, Thrace. In a much later interpolated detail, Ares put the youth Alectryōn by his door to warn them of Helios' arrival, as Helios would tell Hephaestus of Aphrodite's infidelity if the two were discovered, but Alectryōn fell asleep. Helios discovered the two and alerted Hephaestus. Ares was furious and turned Alectryōn into a rooster, which now never forgets to announce the arrival of the sun in the morning.<sup>8</sup>

## About the Dream or the Cock Ονειρος η Αλεκτρυων Somnium seu Gallus

A dialogue between *The Cock*, an incarnation of Pythagoras, and *Micyllus*, a poor cobbler, by Lucian of Samosata as translated from the Greek by the Brothers H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905.

There now follows a short comment on the plot.

Earlier, in *Καταπλους η Τυραννος* (*Cataplus seu Tyrannus*), a dialogue of the dead, Micyllus . . .

“being left behind on the banks of the Styx, swims after Charon's boat, which being full, he finds a place on the shoulders of the tyrant [Megasthenes], and does not cease tormenting him the whole way. There is considerable drollery in his pretended lament for his old lasts and slippers, when requested by Mercury to grieve a little, just for the sake of keeping up the custom.”

Here, in *Ονειρος η Αλεκτρυων* (*Somnium seu Gallus*) . . .

“we have the cobbler Micyllus again, who has been dreaming that he has fallen heir to Eucrates, a *nouveau riche*. From this state of felicity he is awakened by the crowing of his cock, which he threatens to kill as soon as he gets up. The cock discovers himself to be Pythagoras in one of his transmigratory states,

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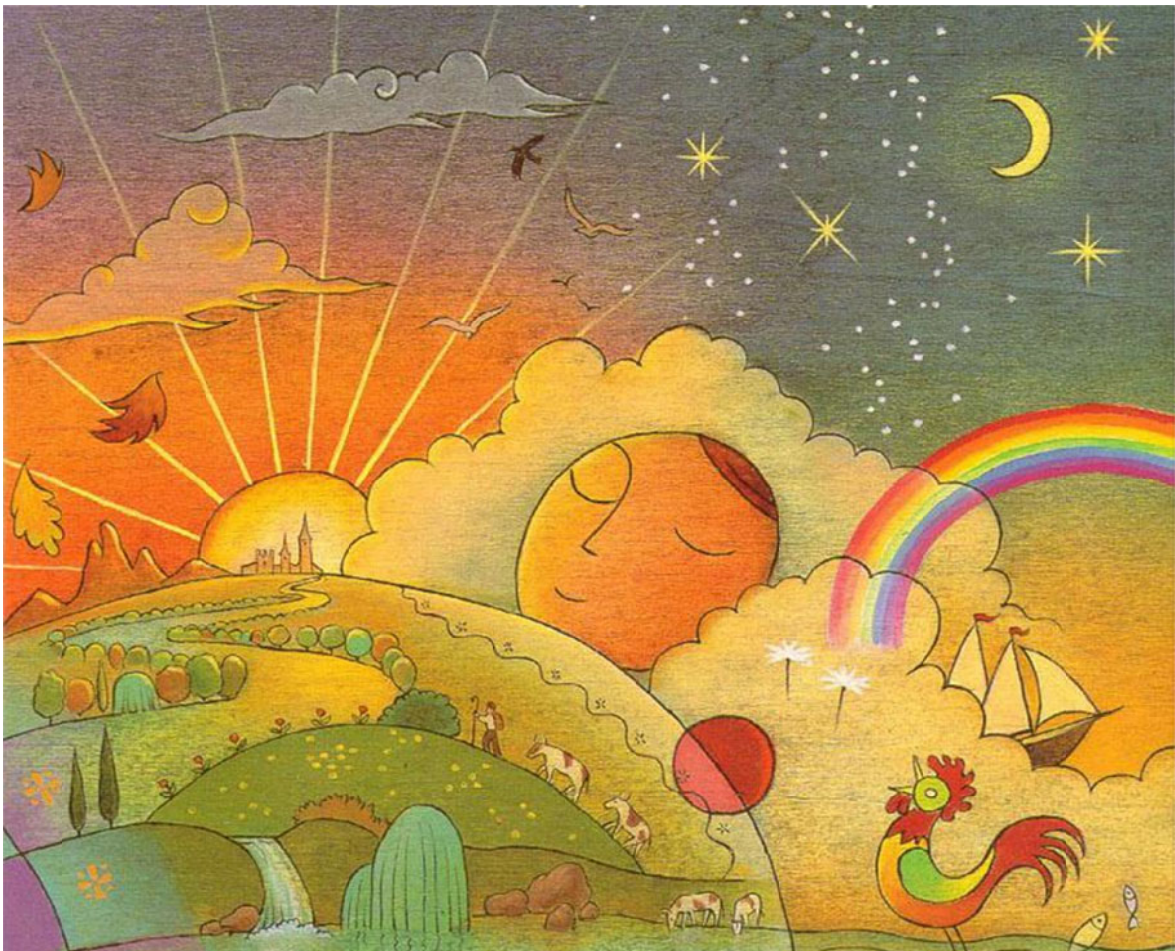
<sup>6</sup> [Æolian name of Mars or Brahmā, the differentiated Force in Cosmos.]

<sup>7</sup> [I.e., Venus. There are two Aphrodites: Urania or goddess of spiritual love, and Pandemos, of earthly love. See “Plotinus on the Dual Aphrodite” in our Mystic Verse and Insights Series.]

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Wikipedia*: Ares



which gives occasion to some jokes at the expense of that philosophy. The cock then endeavours to persuade Micyllus that he is much happier than the rich men whom he envies, and in order to convince him, desires him to pluck one of the long feathers from his tail, which has the power of conferring invisibility. Micyllus, who has evidently a lurking spite against the bird, plucks out both his long feathers, much to the discomfiture of Pythagoras, whom, however, the cobbler consoles by telling that he looks much handsomer so than he would with only one. Being now invisible, Pythagoras and Micyllus go round to the houses of several rich men, and behold their miseries and vices. This piece may be reckoned among the best of Lucian's.”<sup>9</sup>



When the wind stops by Stefano Vitale

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Smith W. (Ed.). *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*. Boston: Charles C. Little & James Brown, 1849; Vol. II, p. 819



## The Dream or the Cock

**Micyllus** Detested bird! May Zeus crunch your every bone! Shriill, envious brute: to wake me from delightful dreams of wealth and magic blessedness with those piercing, deafening notes! Am I not even in sleep to find a refuge from Poverty, Poverty more vile than your vile self? Why, it cannot be mid-night yet: all is hushed; numbness — sure messenger of approaching dawn — has not yet performed its morning office upon my limbs: and this wakeful brute (one would think he was guarding the golden fleece) starts crowing before night has fairly begun. But he shall pay for it. — Yes; only wait till daylight comes, and my stick shall avenge me; I am not going to flounder about after you in the dark.

**The Cock** Why, master, I meant to give you a pleasant surprise: I borrowed what I could from the night, that you might be up early and break the back of your work; think, if you get a shoe done before sunrise, you are so much the nearer to earning your day's bread. However, if you prefer to sleep, I have done; I will be mute as any fish. Only you may find your rich dreams followed by a hungry awakening.

**Micyllus** God of portents! Heracles preserve us from the evil to come! My cock has spoken with a human voice.

**The Cock** And what if he has? Is that so very portentous?

**Micyllus** I should think it was. All Gods avert the omen!

**The Cock** Micyllus, I am afraid your education has been sadly neglected. If you had read your Homer, you would know that Achilles' horse Xanthus declined to have anything more to do with neighing, and stood on the field of battle spouting whole hexameters; *he* was not content with plain prose like me; he even took to prophecy, and foretold to Achilles what should befall him. Nor was this considered anything out of the way; Achilles saw nothing portentous about it, nor did he invoke Heracles on the occasion. What a fuss you would have made, if the keel of the Argo had addressed a remark to you, or the leaves of the Dodonaean oak had opened their mouths and prophesied; or if you had seen ox-hides crawling about, and heard the half-cooked flesh of the beasts bellowing on the spit! As for me, considering my connexion with Hermes — most loquacious, most argumentative of Gods — and my familiar intercourse with mankind, it was only to be expected that I should pick up your language pretty quickly. Nay, there is a still better reason for my conversational powers, which I don't mind telling you, if you will promise to keep quiet about it.



**Micyllus** Am I dreaming still, or is this bird really talking to me? — In Hermes' name then, good creature, out with your better reason; I will be mum, never fear; it shall go no further. Why, who would believe the story, when I told him that I had it from a cock?

**The Cock** Listen. You will doubtless be surprised to learn that not so long ago the cock who stands before you was a man.

**Micyllus** Why, to be sure, I have heard something like this before about a cock. It was the story of a young man called Alectryon;<sup>10</sup> he was a friend of Ares, — used to join in his revels and junketings, and give him a hand in his love affairs. Whenever Ares went to pay a sly visit to Aphrodite, he used to take Alectryon with him, and as he was particularly afraid that the Sun would see him, and tell Hephaestus, he would always leave Alectryon at the door, so that he might give him warning when the Sun was up. But one day Alectryon fell asleep, and unwittingly betrayed his trust; the consequence was that the Sun got a peep at the lovers, while Ares was having a comfortable nap, relying on Alectryon to tell him if any one came. Hephaestus heard of it, and caught them in that cage of his, which he had long had waiting for them. When Ares was released, he was so angry with Alectryon that he turned him into a cock, armour and all, as is shown by his crest; and that is what makes you cocks in such a hurry to crow at dawn, to let us know that the Sun is coming up presently; it is your way of apologizing to Ares, though crowing will not mend matters now.

**The Cock** Yes, there is that story too: but that is nothing to do with mine; I only became a cock quite lately.

**Micyllus** But what I want to know is, how did it happen?

**The Cock** Did you ever hear of Pythagoras of Samos, son of Mnesarchus?

**Micyllus** What, that sophist quack, who forbade the eating of meat, and would have banished beans from our tables (no beans, indeed! my favourite food!), and who wanted people to go for five years without speaking?

**The Cock** And who, I may add, was Euphorbus before he was Pythagoras.

**Micyllus** He was a knave and a humbug, that Pythagoras, by all accounts.

**The Cock** *That* Pythagoras, my worthy friend, is now before you in person: spare his feelings, especially as you know nothing about his real character.

**Micyllus** Portent upon portent! a cock philosopher! But proceed, son of Mnesarchus: how came you to change from man to bird, from Samos to Tanager? 'Tis an unconvincing story; I find a difficulty in swallowing it. I have noticed two things about you already, which do not look much like Pythagoras.

**The Cock** Yes?

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<sup>10</sup> [Ἀλεκτρυών is the Greek word for a cock.]



- Micyllus** For one thing, you are garrulous; I might say noisy. Now, if I am not mistaken, Pythagoras advocated a course of five years' silence at a stretch. As for the other, it is rank heresy. You will remember that yesterday, not having anything else to give you, I brought you some beans: and you, — you gobbled them up without thinking twice about it! Either you lied when you told me you were Pythagoras, or else you have sinned against your own laws: in eating those beans, you have as good as bolted your own father's head.
- The Cock** Ah, you don't understand, Micyllus. There is a reason for these things: different diets suit different creatures. I was a philosopher in those days: accordingly I abstained from beans. Now, on the contrary, I propose to eat beans; they are an unexceptionable diet for birds. And now if you like I will tell you how from being Pythagoras I have come to be — what you see me; and all about the other lives I have lived, and what were the good points of each.
- Micyllus** Tell on; there is nothing I should like better. Indeed, if I were given my choice between hearing your story, and having my late dream of riches over again, I don't know which I should decide on. 'Twas a sweet vision, of joys above all price: yet not above the tale of my cock's adventures.
- The Cock** What, still puzzling over the import of a dream? Still busy with vain phantoms, chasing a visionary happiness through your head, that "fleeting" joy, as the poet calls it?
- Micyllus** Ah, cock, cock, I shall never forget it. That dream has left its honeyed spell on my eyelids; 'tis all I can do to open them; they would fain close once more in sleep. As a feather tickles the ear, so did that vision tickle my imagination.
- The Cock** Bless me, you seem to be very hard hit. Dreams are winged, so they say, and their flight circumscribed by sleep: this one seems to have broken bounds, and taken up its abode in wakeful eyes, transferring thither its honeyed spell, its lifelike presence. Tell me this dream of your desire.
- Micyllus** With all my heart; it is a joy to remember it, and to speak of it. But what about your transformations?
- The Cock** They must wait till you have done dreaming, and wiped the honey from your eyelids. So you begin: I want to see which gates the dream came through, the ivory or the horn.
- Micyllus** Through neither.
- The Cock** Well, but these are the only two that Homer mentions.
- Micyllus** Homer may go hang: what does a babbling poet know about dreams? Pauper dreams may come through those gates, for all I know; that was the kind that Homer saw, and not over clearly at that, as he was blind. But *my* beauty came through golden gates, golden himself and clothed in gold and bringing gold.



**The Cock** Enough of gold, most gentle Midas; for to a Midas-prayer it is that I trace your vision; you must have dreamt whole minefuls.

**Micyllus** Gold upon gold was there; picture if you can that glorious lightning-flash! What is it that Pindar says about gold? Can you help me to it? He says water is best, and then very properly proceeds to sing the praises of gold; it comes at the beginning of the book, and a beautiful ode it is.

**The Cock** What about this?

Chiefest of all good we hold Water: even so doth gold,  
Like a fire that flameth through the night,  
Shine mid lordly wealth most lordly bright.

**Micyllus** The very words; I could fancy that Pindar had seen my vision. And now, my philosophic cock, I will proceed to details. That I did not dine at home last night, you are already aware; the wealthy Eucrates had met me in the morning, and told me to come to dinner after my bath at his usual hour.

**The Cock** Too well do I know it, after starving all day long. It was quite late before you came home — half-seas over — and gave me those five beans; rather short commons for a cock who has been an athlete in his day, and contended at Olympia, not without distinction.

**Micyllus** Well, so when I got back, and had given you the beans, I went to sleep, and

Through the ambrosial night a dream divine —  
ah, divine indeed! —

**The Cock** Wait: let us have Eucrates first. What sort of a dinner was it? Tell me all about it. Seize the opportunity: dine once more in waking dream; chew the cud of prandial reminiscence.

**Micyllus** I thought all that would bore you; however, if you are curious, all right. I had never dined at a great house in my life before, when yesterday, in a lucky hour for me, I fell in with Eucrates. After saluting him respectfully as usual, I was making off — not to bring discredit on him by walking at his side in my shabby clothes — when he spoke to me: “Micyllus,” he said, “it is my daughter’s birthday today, and I have invited a number of friends to celebrate it. One of them, I hear, is indisposed, and will not be able to come; you can take his place, always provided that I do not hear from him, for at present I do not know whether to expect him or not.” I made my bow, and departed, praying that ague, pleurisy, and gout might light upon the invalid whose appetite I had the honour to represent. I thought bath-time would never come; I could not keep my eyes off the dial: where was the shadow now? could I go yet? At last it really was time: I scraped the dirt off, and made myself smart, turning my cloak inside out, so that the clean side might be uppermost. Among the numerous guests assembled at the door, whom should I see but the very man whose understudy I was to be, the invalid, in a litter! He was evidently in a sad way; groaning and coughing and spitting in the most alarmingly emphatic manner; ghostly



pale, puffy, and not much less, I reckoned, than sixty years old. He was a philosopher, so they said, — one of those who fill boys' heads with non-sensical ideas. Certainly his beard was well adapted to the part he played; it cried aloud for the barber. Archibius the doctor asked him what induced him to venture out in that state of health. "Oh," says he, "a man must not shirk his duties, least of all a philosopher; no matter if a thousand ailments stand in his way. Eucrates would have taken it as a slight." "You're out there," I cried; "Eucrates would be only too glad if you would cough out your soul at home instead of doing it at his table." He made as if he had not heard my jest; he was above such things. Presently in came Eucrates from his bath, and seeing Thesmopolis (the philosopher), "Ah, Professor," says he, "I am glad to see you here; not that it would have made any difference, even if you had stayed at home; I should have had everything sent over to you." And with that he took the philosopher's hand, and with the help of the slaves, conducted him in. I thought it was time for me to be going about my business: however, Eucrates turned round to me, and seeing how glum I looked, "Micyllus," says he, after a good deal of humming and ha'ing, "you must join us; we shall find room for you; I can send my boy to dine with his mother and the women." It had very nearly turned out a wild-goose chase, but not quite: I walked in, feeling rather ashamed of myself for having done the boy out of his dinner. We were now to take our places. Thesmopolis was first hoisted into his, with some difficulty, by five stalwart youths, who propped him up on every side with cushions to keep him in his place and enable him to hold out to the end. As no one else was disposed to have him for a neighbour, that privilege was assigned to me without ceremony. And then dinner was brought in: such dainties, Pythagoras, such variety! and everything served on gold or silver. Golden cups, smart servants, musicians, jesters, — altogether, it was delightful. Thesmopolis, though, annoyed me a good deal: he kept on worrying about virtue, and explaining how two negatives make one positive, and how when it is day it is not night; among other things, he would have it that I had horns. I wanted none of his philosophy, but on he went, quite spoiling my pleasure; it was impossible to listen to the music and singing. So that is what the dinner was like.

**The Cock** Not much of a one, especially with that old fool for your neighbour.

**Micyllus** And now for the dream, which was about no other than Eucrates. How it came about I don't know, but Eucrates was childless, and was on his death-bed; he sent for me and made his will, leaving everything to me, and soon after died. I now came into the property, and ladled out gold and silver by the bucketful from springs that never dried; furniture and plates, clothes and servants, all were mine. I drove abroad, the admiration of all eyes and the envy of all hearts, lolling in my carriage behind a pair of creams, with a crowd of attendants on horseback and on foot in front of me, and a larger crowd behind. Dressed in Eucrates' splendid clothes, my fingers loaded with a score or so of rings, I ordered a magnificent feast to be prepared for the entertainment of my friends. The next moment they



were there, — it happens so in dreams; dinner was brought in, the wine splashed in the cups. I was pledging each of my friends in turn in beakers of gold, and the biscuits were just being brought in, when that unlucky crow of yours spoilt all: over went the tables, and away flew my visionary wealth to all the quarters of Heaven. Had I not some reason to be annoyed with you? I could have gone on with that dream for three nights on end.

**The Cock** Is the love of gold so absorbing a passion? Gold the only thing you can find to admire? The possession of gold the sole happiness?

**Micyllus** I am not the only one, Pythagoras. Why, you yourself (when you were Euphorbus) used to go to battle with your hair adorned with gold and silver, though iron would have been more to the point than gold under the circumstances; however, you thought differently, and fought with a golden circlet about your brow; which I suppose is why Homer compares your hair to that of the Graces

in gold and silver clasped.

No doubt its charm would be greatly enhanced by the glitter of the interwoven gold. After all, though, you, my golden-haired friend, were but the son of Panthus; one can understand your respect for gold. But the father of Gods and men, the son of Cronus and Rhea himself, could find no surer way to the heart of his Argive enchantress — or to those of her gaolers — than this same metal; you know the story, how he turned himself into gold, and came showering down through the roof into the presence of his beloved? Need I say more? Need I point out the useful purposes that gold serves? the beauty and wisdom and strength, the honour and glory it confers on its possessors, at a moment's notice turning obscurity and infamy into world-wide fame? You know my neighbour and fellow craftsman, Simon, who supped with me not long since? 'Twas at the Saturnalia, the day I made that pease-pudding, with the two slices of sausage in it?

**The Cock** I know: the little snub-nosed fellow, who went off with our pudding-basin under his arm, — the only one we had; I saw him with these eyes.

**Micyllus** So it was he who stole that basin! and he swore by all his Gods that he knew nothing of it! But you should have called out, and told me how we were being plundered.

**The Cock** I did crow; it was all I could do just then. But what were you going to say about Simon?

**Micyllus** He had a cousin, Drimylus, who was tremendously rich. During his lifetime, Drimylus never gave him a penny; and no wonder, for he never laid a finger on his money himself. But the other day he died, and Simon has come in for everything. No more dirty rags for him now, no more trencher-licking: he drives abroad clothed in purple and scarlet; slaves and horses are his, golden cups and ivory-footed tables, and men prostrate themselves before him. As for me, he will not so much as look at me: it was only the other day that I met him, and said, "Good day, Simon": he flew into a



rage: “Tell that beggar,” he said, “not to cut down my name; it is Simoni-des, not Simon.” And that is not all, — the women are in love with him too, and Simon is coy and cold: some he receives graciously, but the neglected ones declare they will hang themselves. See what gold can do! It is like Aphrodite’s girdle, transforming the unsightly and making them lovely to behold. What say the poets?

Happy the hand that grasps thee, Gold!

and again,

Gold hath dominion over mortal men.

But what are you laughing at?

**The Cock** Ah, Micyllus, I see that you are no wiser than your neighbours; you have the usual mistaken notions about the rich, whose life, I assure you, is far more miserable than your own. I ought to know: I have tried everything, and been poor man and rich man times out of number. You will find out all about it before long.

**Micyllus** Ah, to be sure, it is your turn now. Tell me how you came to be changed into a cock, and what each of your lives was like.

**The Cock** Very well; and I may remark, by way of preface, that of all the lives I have ever known none was happier than yours.

**Micyllus** Than mine? Exasperating fowl! All I say is, may you have one like it! Now then: begin from Euphorbus, and tell me how you came to be Pythagoras, and so on, down to the cock. I’ll warrant you have not been through all those different lives without seeing some strange sights, and having your adventures.

**The Cock** How my spirit first proceeded from Apollo, and took flight to earth, and entered into a human form, and what was the nature of the crime thus expiated, — all this would take too long to tell; nor is it fitting either for me to speak of such matters or for you to hear of them. I pass to the time when I became Euphorbus, —

**Micyllus** Wait a minute: have I ever been changed in this way?

**The Cock** You have.

**Micyllus** Then who was I, do you know? I am curious about that.

**The Cock** Why, you were an Indian ant, of the gold-digging species.<sup>11</sup>

**Micyllus** What could induce me, misguided insect that I was, to leave that life without so much as a grain of gold-dust to supply my needs in this one? And what am I going to be next? I suppose you can tell me. If it is anything good, I’ll hang myself this moment from the very perch on which you stand.

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<sup>11</sup> [I.e., μυρμηξ Ινδικος, των το χρυσιον ανορυπτοντων.]



**The Cock** That I can on no account divulge. To resume. When I was Euphorbus, I fought at Troy, and was slain by Menelaus. Some time then elapsed before I entered into the body of Pythagoras. During this interval, I remained without a habitation, waiting till Mnesarchus had prepared one for me.

**Micyllus** What, without meat or drink?

**The Cock** Oh yes; these are mere bodily requirements.

**Micyllus** Well, first I will have about the Trojan war. Did it all happen as Homer describes?

**The Cock** Homer! What should he know of the matter? He was a camel in Bactria all the time. I may tell you that things were not on such a tremendous scale in those days as is commonly supposed: Ajax was not so very tall, nor Helen so very beautiful. I saw her: she had a fair complexion, to be sure, and her neck was long enough to suggest her swan parentage: but then she was such an age — as old as Hecuba, almost. You see, Theseus had carried her off first, and she had lived with him at Aphidnae: now Theseus was a contemporary of Heracles, and the former capture of Troy, by Heracles, had taken place in the generation before mine; my father, who told me all this, remembered seeing Heracles when he was himself a boy.

**Micyllus** Well, and Achilles: was he so much better than other people, or is that all stuff and nonsense?

**The Cock** Ah, I never came across Achilles; I am not very strong on the Greeks; I was on the other side, of course. There is one thing, though: I made pretty short work of his friend Patroclus — ran him clean through with my spear.

**Micyllus** After which Menelaus settled you with still greater facility. Well, that will do for Troy. And when you were Pythagoras?

**The Cock** When I was Pythagoras, I was — not to deceive you — a sophist; that is the long and short of it. At the same time, I was not uncultured, not unversed in polite learning. I travelled in Egypt, cultivated the acquaintance of the priests, and learnt wisdom from their mouths; I penetrated into their temples and mastered the sacred books of Orus and Isis; finally, I took ship to Italy, where I made such an impression on the Greeks that they reckoned me among the Gods.

**Micyllus** I have heard all about that; and also how you were supposed to have risen from the dead, and how you had a golden thigh, and favoured the public with a sight of it on occasion. But what put it into your head to make that law about meat and beans?

**The Cock** Ah, don't ask me that, Micyllus.

**Micyllus** But why not?

**The Cock** I am ashamed to answer you.

**Micyllus** Come, out with it! I am your friend and fellow lodger; we will drop the "master" now.



**The Cock** There was neither common sense nor philosophy in that law. The fact is, I saw that if I did just the same as other people, I should draw very few admirers; my prestige, I considered, would be in proportion to my originality. Hence these innovations, the motive of which I wrapped up in mystery; each man was left to make his own conjecture, that all might be equally impressed by my oracular obscurity. There now! you are laughing at me; it is your turn this time.

**Micyllus** I am laughing much more at the folk of Cortona and Metapontum and Tarentum, and the rest of those mute disciples who worshipped the ground you trod on. And in what form was your spirit next clothed, after it had put off Pythagoras?

**The Cock** In that of Aspasia, the Milesian courtesan.

**Micyllus** Dear, dear! And your versatility has even changed sexes? My gallant cock has positively laid eggs in his time? Pythagoras has carded and spun? Pythagoras the mistress — and the mother — of a Pericles? My Pythagoras no better than he should be?

**The Cock** I do not stand alone. I had the example of Tiresias and of Caeneus; your gibes touch them as well as me.

**Micyllus** And did you like being a man best, or receiving the addresses of Pericles?

**The Cock** Ha! the question that Tiresias paid so dearly for answering!

**Micyllus** Never mind, then, — Euripides has settled the point; he says he would rather bear the shock of battle thrice than once the pangs of labour.

**The Cock** Ah, just a word in your ear: those pangs will shortly be your own; more than once, in the course of a lengthy career, you will be a woman.

**Micyllus** Strangulation on the bird! Does he think we all hail from Miletus or Samos? Yes, I said Samos; Pythagoras has had his admirers, by all accounts, as well as Aspasia. However; — what was your sex next time?

**The Cock** I was the Cynic Crates.

**Micyllus** Castor and Pollux! What a change was there!

**The Cock** Then it was a king; then a pauper, and presently a satrap, and after that came horse, jackdaw, frog, and I know not how many more; there is no reckoning them up in detail. Latterly, I have been a cock several times. I liked the life; many is the king, many the pauper and millionaire, with whom I took service in that capacity before I came to you. In your lamentations about poverty, and your admiration of the rich, I find an unfailing source of entertainment; little do you know what those rich have to put up with! If you had any idea of their anxieties, you would laugh to think how you had been deceived as to the blessedness of wealth.

**Micyllus** Well, Pythagoras, — or is there any other name you prefer? I shall throw you out, perhaps, if I keep on calling you different things?



**The Cock** Euphorbus or Pythagoras, Aspasia or Crates, it is all the same to me; one is as much my name as another. Or stay: not to be wanting in respect to a bird whose humble exterior contains so many souls, you had better use the evidence of your own eyes and call me The Cock.

**Micyllus** Then, Cock, as you have tried wellnigh every kind of life, you can next give me a clear description of the lives of rich and poor respectively; we will see if there was any truth in your assertion, that I was better off than the rich.

**The Cock** Well now, look at it this way. To begin with, you are very little troubled with military matters. Suppose there is talk of an invasion: *you* are under no uneasiness about the destruction of your crops, or the cutting-up of your gardens, or the ruin of your vines; at the first sound of the trumpet (if you even hear it), all you have to think of is, how to convey your own person out of harm's way. Well, the rich have got to provide for that too, and they have the mortification into the bargain of looking on while their lands are being ravaged. Is a war-tax to be levied? It all falls on them. When you take the field, theirs are the posts of honour — and danger: whereas you, with no worse encumbrance than your wicker shield, are in the best of trim for taking care of yourself; and when the time comes for the general to offer up a sacrifice of thanksgiving for his victory, your presence may be relied on at the festive scene.

Then again, in time of peace, you, as one of the commons, march up to the Assembly to lord it over the rich, who tremble and crouch before you, and seek to propitiate you with grants. They must labour, that you may be supplied with baths and games and spectacles and the like to your satisfaction; you are their censor and critic, their stern taskmaster, who will not always hear before condemning; nay, you may give them a smart shower of stones, if the fancy takes you, or confiscate their property. The informer's tongue has no terrors for you; no burglar will scale or undermine *your* walls in search of gold; you are not troubled with book-keeping or debt-collecting; you have no rascally steward to wrangle with; none of the thousand worries of the rich distract you. No, you patch your shoe, and you take your tenpence; and at dusk up you jump from your bench, get a bath if you are in the humour for it, buy yourself a haddock or some sprats or a few heads of garlic, and make merry therewith; Poverty, best of philosophers, is your companion, and you are seldom at a loss for a song. And what is the result? Health and strength, and a hardiness that sets cold at defiance. Your work keeps you keen-set; the ills that seem insuperable to other men find a tough customer in you. Why, no serious sickness ever comes near you: fever, perhaps, lays a light hand on you now and again; you let him have his way for a day or two, and then you are up again, and shake the pest off; he beats a hasty retreat, not liking the look of a man who drinks cold water at that rate, and has such a short way with the doctors. But look at the rich: name the disease to which these creatures are not subjected by their intemperance; gout, consumption, pneumonia, dropsy, — they all come of high feeding. Some of these men



are like Icarus: they fly too high, they get near the sun, not realizing that their wings are fastened with wax; and then some day there is a great splash, and they have disappeared headlong into the deep. Others there are who follow Daedalus' example; such minds eschew the upper air, and keep their wax within splashing distance of the sea; these generally get safely to their journey's end.

**Micyllus** Shrewd, sensible fellows.

**The Cock** Yes, but among the others you may see some ugly shipwrecks. Croesus is plucked of his feathers, and mounts a pyre for the amusement of the Persians. A tyranny capsizes, and the lordly Dionysius is discovered teaching Corinthian children their alphabet.

**Micyllus** You tell me, Cock, that you have been a king yourself: now how did *you* find the life? I expect you had a pleasant time of it, living on the very fat of the land?

**The Cock** Do not remind me of that miserable existence. A pleasant time! So people thought, no doubt: I knew better; it was vexation upon vexation.

**Micyllus** You surprise me. How should that be? It sounds unlikely.

**The Cock** The country over which I ruled was both extensive and fertile. Its population and the beauty of its cities alike entitled it to the highest consideration. It possessed navigable rivers and excellent harbours. My army was large, my pike-men numerous, my cavalry in a high state of efficiency; it was the same with my fleet; and my wealth was beyond calculation. No circumstance of kingly pomp was wanting; gold plate in abundance, everything on the most magnificent scale. I could not leave my palace without receiving the reverential greetings of the public, who looked on me as a God, and crowded together to see me pass; some enthusiasts would even betake themselves to the roofs of the houses, lest any detail of my equipage, clothes, crown or attendants should escape them. I could make allowance for the ignorance of my subjects, but this did not prevent me from pitying myself, when I reflected on the vexations and worries of my position. I was like those colossal statues, the work of Phidias, Myron or Praxiteles: they too look extremely well from outside: 'tis Poseidon with his trident, Zeus with his thunderbolt, all ivory and gold: but take a peep inside, and what have we? One tangle of bars, bolts, nails, planks, wedges, with pitch and mortar and everything that is unsightly; not to mention a possible colony of rats or mice. There you have royalty.

**Micyllus** But you have not told me what is the mortar, what the bolts and bars and other unsightlinesses that lurk behind a throne. Admiration, dominion, divine honours, — these no doubt fit your simile; there is a touch of the godlike about them. But now let me have the inside of your colossus.

**The Cock** And where shall I begin? With fear and suspicion? The resentments of courtiers and the machinations of conspirators? Scant and broken sleep, troubled dreams, perplexities, forebodings? Or again with the hurry of



business — fiscal — legal — military? Orders to be issued, treaties to be drawn up, estimates to be formed? As for pleasure, such a thing is not to be dreamt of; no, one man must think for all, toil incessantly for all. The Achaean host is snoring to a man:

But sweet sleep came not nigh to Atreus' son,  
Who pondered many things within his heart.

Lydian Croesus is troubled because his son is dumb; Persian Artaxerxes, because Clearchus is raising a host for Cyrus; Dionysius, because Dion whispers in Syracusan ears; Alexander, because Parmenio is praised. Perdiccas has no peace for Ptolemy, Ptolemy none for Seleucus. And there are other griefs than these: his favourite is cold; his concubine loves another; there is talk of a rebellion; there has been muttering among a half-dozen of his guards. And the bitterness of it is, that his nearest and dearest are those whom he is most called on to distrust; from them he must ever look for harm. One we see poisoned by his son, another by his own favourite; and a third will probably fare no better.

**Micyllus** Whew! I like not this, my Cock. Methinks there is safety in bent backs and leather-cutting, and none in golden loving-cups; I will pledge no man in hemlock or in aconite. All *I* have to fear is that my knife may slip out of the line, and draw a drop or two from my fingers: but your kings would seem to sit down to dinner with Death, and to lead dogs' lives into the bargain. They go at last; and then they are more like play-actors than anything else — like such a one as you may see taking the part of Cecrops or Sisyphus or Telephus. He has his diadem and his ivory-hilted sword, his waving hair and spangled cloak: but accidents will happen, — suppose he makes a false step: down he comes on the middle of the stage, and the audience roars with laughter. For there is his mask, crumpled up, diadem and all, and his own bloody coxcomb showing underneath it; his legs are laid bare to the knees, and you see the dirty rags inside his fine robe, and the great lumbering buskins. Ha, ha, friend Cock, have I learnt to turn a simile already? Well, there are my views on tyranny. Now for the horses and dogs and frogs and fishes: how did you like that kind of thing?

**The Cock** Your question would take a long time to answer; more time than we can spare. But — to sum up my experience in two words — every one of these creatures has an easier life of it than man. Their aims, their wants, are all confined to the body: such a thing as a tax-farming horse or a litigant frog, a jackdaw sophist, a gnat confectioner, or a cock pander, is unknown; they leave such things to humanity.

**Micyllus** It may be as you say. But, Cock (I don't mind making a clean breast of it to you), I have had a fancy all my life for being rich, and I am as bad as ever; nay, worse, for there is the dream, still flaunting its gold before my eyes; and that confounded Simon, too, — it chokes me to think of him rolling in luxury.



- The Cock** I'll put that right. It is still dark, get up and come with me. You shall pay a visit to Simon and other rich men, and see how things stand with them.
- Micyllus** But the doors are locked. Would you have me break in?
- The Cock** Oh no; but I have a certain privilege from Hermes, my patron: you see my longest tail-feather, the curling one that hangs down, —
- Micyllus** There are two curling ones that hang down.
- The Cock** The one on the right. By allowing any one to pluck out that feather and carry it, I give him the power, for as long as I like, of opening all doors and seeing everything, himself unseen.
- Micyllus** Cock, you are a positive conjurer. Only give me the feather, and it shall not be long before Simon's wealth shifts its quarters; I'll slip in and make a clean sweep. His teeth shall tug leather again.
- The Cock** That must not be. I have my instructions from Hermes, and if my feather is put to any such purpose, I am to call out and expose the offender.
- Micyllus** Hermes, of all people, grudge a man a little thievery? I'll not believe it of him. However, let us start; I promise not to touch the gold . . . if I can help it.
- The Cock** You must pluck out the feather first. . . . What's this? You have taken both!
- Micyllus** Better to be on the safe side. And it would look so bad to have one half of your tail gone and not the other.
- The Cock** Well. Where shall we go first? To Simon's?
- Micyllus** Yes, yes, Simon first. Simonides it is, nowadays; two syllables is not enough for him since he has come into money. . . . Here we are; what do I do next?
- The Cock** Apply the feather to the bolt.
- Micyllus** So. Heracles! it might be a key; the door flies open.
- The Cock** Walk in; you go first. Do you see him? He is sitting up over his accounts.
- Micyllus** See him! I should think I did. What a light! That lamp wants a drink. And what makes Simon so pale? He is shrivelled up to nothing. That comes of his worries; there is nothing else the matter with him, that I have heard of.
- The Cock** Listen, and you will understand.
- Simon** That seventeen thousand in the hole under my bed is safe enough; not a soul saw me that time. But I believe Sosylus caught me hiding the four thousand under the manger: he is not the most industrious of grooms, he was never too fond of work; but he *lives* in that stable now. And I expect that is not all that has gone, by a long way. What was Tibius doing with those fine great kippers yesterday? And they tell me he paid no less a sum than four shillings for a pair of earrings for his wife. God help me, it's *my* money they're flinging about. I'm not easy about all that plate either: what



if some one should knock a hole in the wall, and make off with it? Many is the one that envies me, and has an eye on my gold; my neighbour Micyllus is as bad as any of them.

**Micyllus** Hear, hear! He is as bad as Simon; he walks off with other people's pudding-basins under his arm.

**The Cock** Hush! we shall be caught.

**Simon** There's nothing like sitting up, and having everything under one's own eye. I'll jump up and go my rounds. . . . You there! you burglar! I see you. . . . Ah, it is but a post; all is well. I'll pull up the gold and count it again; I may have missed something just now. . . . Hark! a step! I knew it; he is upon me! I am beset with enemies. The world conspires against me. Where is my dagger? Only let me catch . . . — I'll put the gold back.

**The Cock** There: now you have seen Simon at home. Let us go on to another house, while there is still some of the night left.

**Micyllus** The worm! what a life! I wish all my enemies such wealth as his. I'll just lend him a box on the ear, and then I am ready.

**Simon** Who was that? Some one struck me! Ah! I am robbed!

**Micyllus** Whine away, Simon, and sit up of nights till you are as yellow as the gold you clutch. — I should like to go to Gniphon the usurer's next; it is quite close. . . . Again the door opens to us.

**The Cock** He is sitting up too, look. It is an anxious time with him; he is reckoning his interest. His fingers are worn to the bone. Presently he will have to leave all this, and become a cockroach, or a gnat, or a bluebottle.

**Micyllus** Senseless brute! it will hardly be a change for the worse. He, like Simon, is pretty well thinned down by his calculations. Let us try some one else.

**The Cock** What about your friend Eucrates? See, the door stands open; let us go in.

**Micyllus** An hour ago, all this was mine!

**The Cock** Still the golden dream! — Look at the hoary old reprobate: with one of his own slaves!

**Micyllus** Monstrous! And his wife is not much better; she takes her paramour from the kitchen.

**The Cock** Well? Is the inheritance to your liking? Will you have it all?

**Micyllus** I will starve first. Good-bye to gold and high living. Preserve me from my own servants, and I will call myself rich on twopence-halfpenny.

**The Cock** Well, well, we must be getting home; see, it is just dawn. The rest must wait for another day.

