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Of Cocks and Kings

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T HIS ROOSTER CANNOT LOSE.

I had heard my brother Kiko make that allegation many times. And each time, it had cost me a lot of money. There was a time, for instance, when he had his so-called invulnerable rooster. A constabulary soldier had an anting-anting that he had obtained from a captured Moro outlaw. It was guaranteed to make the skin of its carrier immune to all forms of violent harm. Kiko bought the talisman for his fighting fowl. He told me that he had paid such a fabulous amount for the amulet that he had no money left to bet on his bird. So he asked me to be his partner. He supplies the gamecock and amulet; I furnish the cash. I still don't know why, but I agreed to the proposition. That Sunday, I couldn't go with Kiko to the cockpit. Mother was sick and I had to keep her company. So Kiko went off by himself with his combat cock and my money. Anxiously, I awaited his return. The minute he arrived, I asked:

“What happened?”

“Well,” Kiko said, scratching his head, “it’s a long story.”

“Did we win? Did the charm work?”

“Oh, yes, the anting-anting worked.”

“Good!” I said. “I’m so glad! How much did we win?”

“Look, partner,” Kiko then told me, “I think I had better tell you the story from the beginning.”

“Go ahead,” I said. “I’m dying to hear it.”

“Well, first of all, I got to town and made the rooster swallow the charm. True enough, it made our rooster invulnerable. Just as I said it would. During the fight, all the offensive efforts of its opponent proved futile.”
"Yes, yes, go on. Go on."
"As I was saying, the other rooster couldn't harm ours."
"And then?"
"Then our rooster took the offensive. It struck at its adversary and its thrust was so powerful that — believe it or not, partner — it chopped the other cock in two!"
"Yipee! So that's how it won!"
"No, partner. That is how it lost."
"Now, wait a minute, wait a minute, I don't get this. You said that our rooster slashed the other in two. Right?"
"Right."
"That is what I thought you said. Then we won."
"No, partner. We lost."
"Lost? How?"
"That's just what I'm trying to tell you. We lost because when our rooster saw its opponent torn in two, it ran, thinking that it had two opponents."
"Then it was a tie."
"No, partner, we lost. I told you we lost."
"Why?"
"Because when the birds were billed, the other rooster managed to display that it had died with its hackles up. You know the rules of the pit in instances like that. Runaway rooster loses."
"You mean to tell me that the other cock still managed to make the two necessary pecks?"
"Yes, partner."
"But how can a cleaved cock do that?"
"Reflex action, partner. If you think that is amazing, you should see a snake. I have seen snakes bite and wriggle hours after being severed."
"Yes, but those were snakes. This was a rooster. And how can a cock's thrust cut another in two? A rooster's leg doesn't carry that kind of power."
"The anting-anting supplied the power, partner. I told you that was a potent charm. It not only made our rooster impreg-
nable, it also made it strong. Too strong, in fact, for its own good. They call that the point of diminishing returns. You will know all about that after you take economics in school."

"Look, Kiko: if our rooster lost, it is all right. But why do you have to add bull to a cock story?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean: why do you have to tell me that our rooster was invulnerable?"

"Because it was."

"Then how can an invulnerable rooster lose?"

"I just told you how, partner. After all I told you that it was invulnerable — not invincible. There is a big difference, you know. I think you have things confused, partner."

"I see. Well, where is the rooster? I want to see the rooster."

"Rooster? What rooster? Oh, the rooster. Yes, the rooster. That's another thing I wanted to tell you. I — I killed it."

"Killed it! Why?"

"I was so disgusted at its having turned tail and making us lose all that money that I killed it."

"How? You said it was invulnerable."

"Sure, it was invulnerable. But I drowned it in the river on my way home. An anting-ting makes your skin impenetrable, but it cannot protect you from drowning. I am sure you know that, partner."

"But where is it? Where is the drowned rooster? Why don't you have it with you? You always bring your dead cocks home for Mother to cook."

"Not this one, partner. Not even Mother could cook this one. It wouldn't be good even for talunan. The anting-ting has made its flesh too tough. So how can Mother cook it? Besides, Mother is too sick to cook. By the way, how is Mother? Is she feeling any better?"

"Never mind Mother. Look, could it be possible that the rooster was not invulnerable? And that you didn't take it home because it has certain wounds that you don't want me to see?"
"Of course, not. I don't know what you mean."

"Oh yes, you know what I mean. This is not the first time that you make me lose my money in the cockpit. Remember that cock with seven odd scales? You told me it couldn't lose because the seven scales signified the seven holy virtues. And it lost."

"I told you: it lost because there are also seven deadly sins."

"Well, why did you tell me to bet for it then? And how about that one with twelve odd scales? You said that one was unbeatable too because there were twelve apostles."

"Sure, there were twelve apostles. But only eleven were loyal to our Lord. So we really should have looked for a rooster with eleven — and not twelve — odd scales. The science of numerology is not as simple as you would like to make it out. Numerology is a complex thing. Everything should be taken into consideration. And above all, nothing — but nothing! — should be taken for granted."

"Well, why didn’t you tell me all that before the fight? And, oh, yes. By the way, just for the record: which half of the opponent managed to make the two decisive pecks?"

"The half with the beak," Kiko said.

That did it. After that, I resolved to have nothing to do with Kiko's gamefowls. For months I stayed clear from the cockpits. More important still, I made no more bets in absentia. In fact, I made it a point not even to discuss roosters. The only chickens that I had anything to do with, were those that I ate. Kiko, of course, tried extremely hard to get me interested in cocks again. And he wasted no opportunity in injecting chickens in all our conversations. Once, for instance, we were talking about the graft and corruption in the government. Suddenly Kiko interrupted the conversation saying:

"Did you hear a rooster crow?"

"No," I said.

I was damned positive that no rooster had crowed.

"Well, speaking of roosters," Kiko said, "did you see my new red roos —"
"Now, stop it!" I said, cutting him short. "I told you I don't want to hear no more about roosters. I am sick and tired of it. Gad dehmet!"

When Kiko saw that I was really determined to cease cocking, he changed his technique. He tried a psychological approach. He came to me one day and admitted that the anting-anting proved inefficacious. But he claimed good faith and blamed everything on the soldier who had sold him the amulet. He even threatened to punch the constable the next time he saw him in town. But even this failed to revive my interest in cockfighting. It took the King of Roosters to entice me back into the pit.

The King of Roosters was partly my creation. For one day, our teacher asked us to submit a legend gathered from the barrio. I went to see Lakay Kardo regarding this class project, and Lakay Kardo favored me with a folk tale regarding the origin of roosters.

Here is the legend the way I wrote it for Teacher:

"Chiliads before the conquest, there lived a kind, powerful King who had twin sons. When this King died, both twins claimed to be the rightful heir to the throne and they grappled for the King's crown. This so incensed Bathala that he cursed them. And upon being damned, their bodies burst with bright feathers. Then their arms changed to wings and their legs shrivelled as their knees shifted to their backs. Scales encrusted their legs and their feet turned to claws. Their noses and chins met into a hard beak and their eyes slipped over to where their ears had been. And as the ultimate punishment, they were crowned with their own flesh. Bathala had transformed them into the first roosters!

"But so potent was the power of this old King that up to the present time, we feel his great influence. For when roosters crow, everybody — from the president down — has to get up from bed. And to this day, the descendants of this King are still trying to peck the crowns from each other's heads."

Kiko read my theme and then said:

"Very interesting. You know I think you should take up writ-
ing seriously. Who knows? You may be another Rotor. Or another Arguilla."

Now if Kiko's reaction to my composition had stopped with that comment, chances are that I might never have exposed myself anew to the contingencies of cocking. But, unbeknownst to me, the legend on the genesu of gamecocks had given my brother ideas. So much so that a few months later, he came to me and said:

"Come with me. I want to show you something."

We went down the house, and in the yard, tethered to the ground, was a capital cock.

"There," Kiko said, "is the King of Roosters. I have been searching for it high and low ever since I read your story. And now I have found it."

"Nice-looking bird," I said. "But I don't see what it has to do with my story."

"Don't you see?" Kiko said indicating the rooster.

"No."

"Remember what you said about a cock's comb?"

"Yah."

"Well, look at the comb of that chicken."

I picked up the rooster and looked at its crest. It was different from that of other roosters. A cock's comb is flat and palmate. This one was round and shaped like a crown. But I still didn't see what that peculiarity had to do with my story.

"Don't you see?" Kiko said on the verge of exasperation. "This is the King of Roosters. All roosters have combs. But this is the only one that has a crest that looks like a crown. Why? Because it is the real King of Roosters. It is the true heir to the King's crown."

"So?"

"So it cannot lose. How can the King of Roosters lose?"

"Look, why are you telling me all these?"

"Because this fowl is just as much your discovery as it is mine. If I had never read your paper, I never would have known of
the existence of this bird. So actually you and I are co-discoverers of this cock. Do you remember that hermaphroditic chicken that we pitted in a main?"

"Yah, I remember."

"Well, we both discovered that rooster, you and I. And that rooster won. It slaughtered its opponent with one blow."

"It won because its opponent thought it was a hen. And by the time it learned the truth, it was too late."

"Don't be silly. It won because you and I found it together in the cornfields. It was our mutual cock. Just like this rooster. It is our discovery — yours and mine."

"All right, now, what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to help me get this royal rooster ready for battle. This is our chance to clean up. O.K."

Getting the King ready for combat was no problem. Particularly because Kiko had decided against the usual prerequisites for gamefowls. My brother did not bother to stub its spurs. Nor did he trim its feathers or divest it of its comb, wattles and earlobes. "That stuff is for common gamecocks," Kiko said, "but not for regal roosters. The crown is the *sine qua non* of a King. Our rooster must enter the ring in all its grandeur." So all we had to do was to get the King in condition. This meant toughening its muscles and getting rid of fat deposits — particularly around the internal organs — as these induce excessive heat and premature fatigue. Our work comprised merely in proper feeding and diurnal exercising. The ration and exertion wore off the fowl's fat and made its muscles coky. In less than a month, the rooster was in prime physical condition.

Brother and I got up at dawn on that morning of battle. Kiko took the King from its coop and tossed it to the ground. The King flapped its wings majestically and then crowed as if the sun had risen to hear its voice. There was no question that it was ready for action. Its nerves were vibrant and it was demanding opponents to vanquish. In fact, I had never seen it looking so fit. With its crown perched on its head, it looked regal as a pine-
apple. Kiko picked up the King and we headed for the battle pit. But first we made a stop at the house of Don Vicente Valenzuela to borrow an old cock-spur. This spur was a relic of the coffee boom of the eighties, when roosters were reputedly pitted with solid gold gaffs. Its blade was made of Toledo steel and its forked flange was inlaid with gold. It was a beautiful work of art. “No other gaff will do for the King of Cocks,” Kiko said. Don Vicente gladly granted us the use of his gaff. From there Kiko and I proceeded to the arena.

We had not been in the matching place for more than a minute when a man carrying a Jolo rooster challenged our cock. Even if we had tried, I don’t think that Kiko and I could have found a less worthier-looking opponent for the King. The Jolo had exigous neck-feathers. It looked half-naked and half-starved. Kiko and I readily accepted the challenge.

After the usual pre-fight preparations, the two birds were freed for the fray. The Jolo showed absolutely no regard for royalty. As soon as it touched ground, it charged and catapulted itself at the King. The King ducked neatly and the Jolo whizzed overhead with its legs pumping the empty air. Then they turned and again stood fronting each other.

The King then tried to peck the Jolo’s head. But there was little to peck. The Jolo’s head was dubbed clean. There were no fleshy appendages to hold on to. On the other hand, the King’s crown served only to provide the opponent with an ideal place for a bill-hold. The Jolo managed to get several good beak-grips on the King and this placed our rooster at a tremendous disadvantage. For each time the Jolo had a nib-hold, he belted the King almost at will. Luckily, it never connected with its steel.

The two roosters now began feinting each other with leaps. Both were trying to catch each other in an off-position. Then the Jolo jumped. The King instinctively crouched low. For an instant our rooster was in a vantage position. For the Jolo had its heart and vitals exposed while the King had only its head and
back as target. The King, however, failed to follow up this advantage. Instead the Jolo descended and delivered a brain-blow. The head is easy to withdraw from danger. But by now, the excess weight of the crown had begun to tell on our rooster. It could no longer bob its head with the celerity that it displayed at the outset. So when the blow came, the King failed to weave its head on time. The gaff went right through the crown into its royal head. Heavy, indeed, is the head that wears a crown.

For a while I was too stunned to say anything. Then one of the handlers approached me and handed me our dead rooster. The cock's head was hanging like a plumb bob. I took it by the tail, then I accosted Kiko, saying:

"I thought you said that this was the King of Cocks."

"It was," Kiko said.

"Then why did it lose?"

"For God's sakes," Kiko said angrily, "don't tell me that you still believe in divine rights of kings. This is already the century of the common man. The era of royalty is over. Haven't you heard of the revolt of the masses? Why don't you study your history more?"

JAR OF SAGE

I watched her crumble sage from western plains into a jar and put the lid in place.

Here was a turned-down page to read again, a gate unbarred to paths she will retrace.

GLADYS CUTLER