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# *A Perfect Hoax*



# 1

**M**ARIO SAMIGLI WAS a man of letters, getting on for sixty years old. A novel he had published forty years before might have been considered dead if in this world things could die even when they had never been alive. Mario, on the other hand, faded and feeble as he was, went on living very gently for years and years the kind of life made possible by the bit of a job he had, which gave him very little trouble and a very small income. Such a life is healthy, and it becomes healthier still when, as happened with Mario, it is flavoured with some beautiful dream. At his age he continued to think of himself as destined for glory, not because of what he had done or hoped to do, but because a profound inertia – the same inertia which prevented any rebellion against his lot – held him back from the effort of destroying a conviction formed in his mind so many years before. And so in the end it became clear that even the power of destiny has its limitations. Life had broken a few of Mario's bones, but it had left intact his most important organs – his self-respect, and even to some extent his respect for others, on whom glory certainly

depends. In his sad life he was accompanied always by a feeling of satisfaction.

Few could suspect him of such presumption, because Mario concealed it with the almost unconscious shrewdness of the dreamer, which allows him to protect his dream from any conflict with the hard facts of this world. Nevertheless, his dream did at times become apparent, and then those who liked him defended that harmless presumption of his, while the others, when they heard Mario judging living and dead authors decisively, and even citing himself as a precursor, laughed, but gently, seeing him blush as even a sixty year old can, when he is a man of letters and in that situation. And laughter, too, is a healthy thing and not wicked. And so things went very well with all of them: with Mario, his friends and even his enemies.

Mario wrote very little. In fact, for a long time all he had which marked him out as a writer were the pen and the blank sheet of paper ready on his work desk. And those were his happiest years, so full of dreams and void of any troublesome experience, a splendid second childhood, preferable even to the maturity of the more fortunate writer who is able to pour himself out on paper, helped rather than hindered by the word, and who is then left like an empty husk which is nevertheless regarded as succulent fruit.

That era could only remain a happy one so long as he was making an effort to escape from it. As far as Mario was concerned, this effort, though not too violent, was always there. Fortunately he never found a route that would have taken him away from his great happiness. To write another novel like his old one, born out of admiration for the life of those who were superior to him in wealth and status, a life with which he had become acquainted using a telescope, was an impossible undertaking. He continued to love that novel of his because he could love it without a great effort, and it seemed alive to him, like anything which seems to have some rhyme and reason. But when he tried to set about working again on those shadowy people, in order to project them onto paper in the form of words, he experienced a healthy revulsion. The utter, although unconscious, maturity of sixty years prevented such an activity. And he did not think of describing more humble lives – his own life for instance, exemplary in its virtue, and so much the stronger through that resignation which controlled it, unassuming and not even explicit, so much had it by now set its mark on his ego. He lacked the means and even the affection to be able to do that, which was a real drawback, but one common among those who were prevented from knowing any higher life. And he finished up by abandoning people and their lives, whether high or low – or at least he thought he had



abandoned them, and dedicated himself, or so he thought, to animals, by writing fables. And so some very short and stiff little mummies (not corpses, because they did not even have a smell) were produced by him at odd moments. Childlike as he was (not through old age, because he had always been like this), he considered them a start, a useful exercise, an improvement, and he felt he was younger and happier than ever.

At first, repeating the error of his youth, he wrote about animals which he hardly knew, and his fables resounded with roars and bellows. Then he became more human, if we can put it that way, writing about animals with which he thought he was acquainted. So the fly presented him with a large number of fables, showing itself to be a more useful creature than one would have thought. In one of those fables he admired the speed of the dipterans, a speed which was wasted because it neither enabled the creatures to reach their prey nor guaranteed their own safety. Here the tortoise provided the moral. Another fable exalted the fly for destroying those filthy things which it loved so much. A third fable marvelled that the fly, the creature best endowed with eyes, had such imperfect sight. Finally, one fable told of a man who, after squashing a troublesome fly, cried out to it, "I've done you a good turn. Look, you're not a fly any more." With a system like this, it was easy to have a fable

ready every day with the morning coffee. It took the war to teach him that a fable could become an expression of his own mind, which inserted the little mummy into the structure of life, like one of its organs. And this is how that happened.

At the outbreak of the Italian war, Mario was afraid that the first act of persecution that the Royal Police would carry out in Trieste would involve him – one of the few Italian men of letters remaining in the city – in a fine old trial which might send him to dangle on the gallows. This filled him with terror and at the same time with hope, making him now exult and now blanch with terror. He imagined that his judges, a full council of war, composed of representatives of the whole military hierarchy from the general down, must have read his novel and – if there was any justice in the world – studied it. Then, without doubt, a rather distressing moment would arrive. But if the council of war was not composed of barbarians, one might hope that, having read the novel, they would spare his life as a reward. And so he wrote much during the war, shivering with hope and terror even more than an author who knows that there is a public waiting on his words in order to judge them. But out of prudence, he wrote only fables of doubtful meaning, and, between hope and fear, the little mummies came alive for him. The council of war could certainly not condemn him lightly for the fable which treated of a big, strong giant

who fought on a marsh against creatures lighter on their feet than he was, and who perished, still victorious, in the mud which could not bear his weight. Who could prove that this was about Germany? And what reason was there to think of Germany in relation to that lion, which always won because it never went too far away from its own nice big den, until it was discovered that the nice big den lent itself to a smoking-out which was bound to succeed?

But in this way Mario got used to going through life accompanied always by fables, as if they were the pockets of his suit. A literary development he owed to the police, who, however, showed themselves to be quite ignorant of the local literature, and who, during the whole course of the war, left poor Mario in peace, disappointed and reassured.

Then there was a further small development in his work with the choice of more suitable protagonists. There were no longer elephants (such distant creatures), or flies with their eyes quite void of expression, but the dear little sparrows he enjoyed the luxury (a great luxury in Trieste in those days) of feeding in his courtyard with crumbs of bread. Every day he spent some time looking at them moving about, and that was the brightest part of the day, because it was the most literary – more literary perhaps than the fables which resulted from it. He wished he could kiss the things he wrote about! In the evening, on the neighbouring roofs

and on a withered sapling in the courtyard, he heard the sparrows twittering, and he thought that, before turning their little heads right round in sleep, they were telling each other about the events of the day. In the morning there was the same lively and sonorous chattering. They must be talking about the dreams they had had during the night. Like himself, they were living between two experiences – real life and the life of dreams. In short, they were creatures with heads in which thoughts could nestle, and they had colours, attitudes, and even a weakness to arouse compassion, and wings to arouse envy, and so their own real true life. The fable still remained the little mummy stiffened with axioms and theorems, but at least it could be written with a smile.

And Mario's life became enriched with smiles. One day he wrote: "My courtyard is small, but, with practice, one could throw away there ten kilograms of bread a day." That was a true poet's dream. Where could one find in that period ten kilograms of bread for birds that had no coupons? Another day he wrote: "I wish I could abolish the warfare on the little horse chestnut in my courtyard in the evening, when the sparrows try to find the best place in which to spend the night, because it would be a good sign for the future of humanity."

Mario covered the poor sparrows with enough ideas to hide their little limbs. His brother Giulio, who lived with

him, professed to like his writings, but his liking did not extend to the birds in them. He claimed that they had no expressions. But Mario explained that they were themselves an expression of nature, and complementary to things that lie or walk, by being above them, like an accent on a word, a true musical sign.

The happiest expression of nature: in birds not even fear is pallid and despicable, as it is in men. And this is by no means because it is concealed by their feathers. It is in fact obvious, but it does not change their elegant bodies in any way. One ought rather to believe that their little brains do not ever experience it. The alarm comes from sight or hearing, and in its haste passes directly into the wings. What a fine thing it is to have a little brain void of fear in a body in flight! One of the little fellows has been startled? They all fly off, but in a way which seems to say, "This is the right time to be afraid." They know no hesitation. It does not take much to fly when you have wings. And their flight is confident. They avoid obstacles by skimming them, and they go through the densest tangle of a tree's boughs without ever being held up or injured. They only start thinking when they are far away, and then they try to understand the reason for their flight, examining places and things. They bend their little heads gracefully to right and left, and wait patiently until they can return to the place from which they flew. If

fear were involved in every flight, they would all be dead. And Mario suspected that they deliberately procured these moments of agitation for themselves. They could in fact eat the bread that was given to them in utter calm, and instead they close their cunning little eyes, and they are convinced that every mouthful is a theft. And this is precisely how they flavour dry bread. Like true thieves they do not eat the bread in the place where it has been thrown, and there is never any squabbling among them there, because it would be dangerous. The dispute over the crumbs breaks out in the place at which they arrive after their flight.

Thanks to such a great discovery, he drafted the fable with ease:

A generous man, regularly and for many years, had given breadcrumbs every day to some little birds, convinced that in their hearts they loved him for it. The fellow was blind, otherwise he would have realized that the birds thought him an idiot from whom, for years, they had been able to steal the bread without his managing to catch even one of them.

It seems impossible that a man who was always happy, like Mario, should have done such a thing as write this fable. Was his happiness, then, only skin-deep? To attribute so much malice and injustice to the happiest expression of nature!

It was like destroying it. I also think that to imagine such dreadful ingratitude in birds was a grave offence to humanity, because if little birds that cannot speak speak like this, how would those endowed with long tongues express themselves?

And all his little mummies were at heart sad. During the war fewer horses passed along the roads of Trieste, and those that did were fed only on hay. And so there were on the roads none of those appetizing seeds left intact by digestion. And Mario imagined himself asking his little friends, "Are you at your last gasp?" And the little birds replied, "No, but there is a shortage."

Was it that Mario wished to accustom himself to thinking that his own lack of success in life was also a consequence of circumstances over which he had no control, so that he could accept it without repining? The fable remains a cheerful one only because anyone who reads it laughs. He laughs because that stupid bird does not remember the desperation to which on certain days it was so close, because it was not itself affected by it. But after he has laughed, he thinks of the impassive appearance of nature when it carries out its experiments, and he shudders.

Often his fables were dedicated to the disappointment which follows upon all human actions. Apparently he wished to console himself for his own absence from life by telling himself, "I am fine doing nothing, because I do not fail."

A rich gentleman loved the little birds so much that he dedicated to them one of his vast estates, where it was prohibited to trap them or even frighten them. He constructed fine, warm shelters for them for the winter, stocked with abundant food. After some time a number of birds of prey nested in the vast estate, together with cats and even large rodents which attacked the little birds. The rich gentleman wept, but was not cured of his kindness, which is an incurable disease, and he, who wanted to feed the little birds, could not deny food to the hawks and all the other creatures.

So this graceless mockery of human kindness, too, was thought up by the rosy-cheeked, smiling Mario. He cried out that human kindness only succeeds in nurturing life in any place for a short while before blood begins to flow in abundance, and he seemed happy with that.

And so Mario's days were always happy. One might even think that all his sadness passed into his bitter fables and so did not manage to cloud his face. But it appears that he was not so well satisfied during the night and in his dreams. Giulio, his brother, slept in a room next to his. Usually Giulio snored beatifically during his food's digestion, which in a gouty person can be irregular but is at least complete. However, when he was not sleeping, strange sounds came

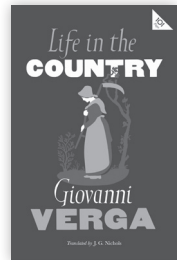
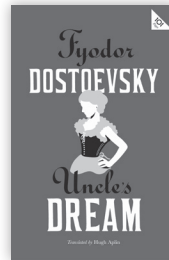
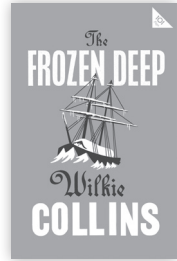
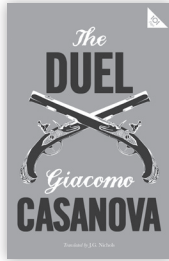


to him from Mario's room – deep sighs that seemed to arise from grief, and then intermittent loud cries of protest. Those loud cries echoed through the night, and they did not sound as if they could have come from the happy and gentle man to be seen in the light of day. Mario did not remember his own dreams and, satisfied with his deep sleep, believed he was as happy in his bed as he was throughout the working day. When Giulio, who was worried, told him about his strange sleeping habits, Mario thought that there was nothing more to it than a new system of snoring. But quite the contrary: given the regularity of the phenomenon, there is no doubt that those noises and cries were the sincere expression, in sleep, of a tormented mind. One might think that it was a manifestation which invalidated the perfect modern theory of dreams, according to which in repose there is always the blessedness of a dream of satisfied desire. But could one not also think that the true dream of a poet is that which he lives when he is wide awake, and that therefore Mario was right to laugh by day and weep by night? There is also another possible explanation supported by the above theory of dreams: there could in Mario's case be a desire satisfied in the free manifestation of his grief. He could, then, be throwing away, in his nightly dream, the heavy disguise which he had to wear during the day to hide his own presumption and be proclaiming, with sighs and shouts, "I deserve more

than this, I deserve something different.” An outburst which could also be safeguarding his rest.

The sun rose in the morning, and Giulio was always astonished to learn that Mario believed he had passed the night, so filled with sighs, in the company of some new fables. Quite harmless ones at times. They were worked out through several days. The war had introduced into the sparrows' courtyard a great novelty – shortage – and poor Mario had invented a method of making the scarce bread last longer. From time to time he appeared in the courtyard and renewed the sparrows' mistrust. They are sluggish creatures when they are not flying, and it takes a long time to rid them of their mistrust. Each of their souls is like a little pair of scales, one side of which is weighted by mistrust and the other by appetite. The latter is always growing, but, if mistrust is also renewed, they do not bite. Strictly speaking, they could die of hunger in the presence of food. A sad experiment if taken to an extreme. But Mario only took it far enough to cause laughter, not tears. The fable (a little bird cried out to the man, “Your bread would be tasty only if you were not there”) remained a happy one too, because the sparrows did not get thinner during the war. Even at that period there were, on the roads of Trieste, abundant scraps on which they could feed themselves.

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