

"GIANNI RODARI GAVE FREE REIN TO HIS IMAGINATION, WITH
INSPIRED PARABLES AND GLEEFUL LIGHTNESS." —ITALO CALVINO



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GIANNI RODARI

ILLUSTRATED BY
FEDERICO MAGGIONI

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TRANSLATED BY
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CHAPTER 1



IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MOUNTAINS LIES Lake Orta. In the middle of the Lake Orta, though not exactly in the middle, is the island of San Giulio. On the island of San Giulio stands the villa of Baron Lamberto, an exceedingly elderly gentleman (he is ninety-three years old) who is very wealthy (he owns twenty-four banks in Italy, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Singapore, and so on) and invariably ill. He has twenty-four maladies.

Only his butler Anselmo can remember them all. Anselmo keeps a list of the illnesses, in alphabetical order, in a little pocket notebook: asthma, arteriosclerosis, arthritis, arthrosis, chronic bronchitis, and so forth all the way up to the Z's, with Zellweger Syndrome. Alongside each illness, Anselmo has written down which medicines need to be taken, the time of day or night, the foods that are permitted and those that are forbidden, the advice of the various physicians:

“Stay away from salt, which will drive up your blood pressure.”

“Reduce your sugar intake, which does not sit well with diabetes.”

“Avoid excitement, stairways, breezes and drafts, rainfall, sunshine, and the moon.”

There are times when Baron Lamberto feels a slight nagging pain here or there, but he can't quite pinpoint which of his illnesses is responsible. He will ask his butler:

“Anselmo, a shooting pain here and another one there?”

“Number seven, Lord Lamberto: the duodenal ulcer.”

Or else, he will ask: “Anselmo, that dizziness again. What could it be?”

“Number nine, Lord Lamberto: your liver. Though we cannot rule out a little mischief from number fifteen,



your thyroid condition.”

The baron gets his numbers mixed up sometimes.

“Anselmo, I am really suffering from twenty-three today.”

“Your tonsils?”

“No, my pancreas.”

“Begging your pardon, Lord Lamberto, but we have the pancreas listed as number eleven.”

“Isn’t number eleven gallbladder?”

“Gallbladder’s five, Lord Lamberto. Look for yourself.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter, Anselmo, it doesn’t matter. What’s the weather like?”

“Foggy, Lord Lamberto. Temperature’s dropping. Snowfall all along the Alps.”

Baron Lamberto also owns a mansion in Egypt, just a stone’s throw from the pyramids. He has another mansion in California. And then he has one on the Costa Brava, one in Catalonia, and another on the Costa Smeralda, in Sardinia. He also has well-heated apartments in Rome, Zurich, and Copenhagen. In the winter, however, he generally goes to Egypt to bake his old bones in the bright sunlight, especially his longer bones, which are important for their marrow, the biological powerhouse that manufactures red globules and white globules.

And so, once again, they set off for Egypt. But they didn’t stay long. In fact, during a walk along the banks of the Nile, they met an Egyptian fakir and stood absorbed in conversation for a bit. Directly after this meeting, the

baron Lamberto and his manservant Anselmo took the first plane back to Italy, and hurried back to the seclusion of the villa on the island of San Giulio, to work on certain experiments. Time went by, and soon they were not alone. In the attic of the villa, now, there were six people who, day and night, droned the baron's name over and over:

“Lamberto, Lamberto, Lamberto . . .”

“Lamberto, Lamberto, Lamberto . . .”

The first to start was young Signorina Delfina, and then Signor Armando took over from her. As Signor Giacomini finished up, Signora Zanzi started. Then it was Signor Bergamini's turn, followed by Signora Merlo, and then it came around to Signorina Delfina again. They each did a one-hour shift; at night, two-hour shifts.

“Lamberto, Lamberto, Lamberto . . .”

“Lamberto, Lamberto, Lamberto . . .”

Occasionally Signorina Delfina can't help but laugh. As she's about to fall asleep, she wonders: “What a strange job! What is it good for? Are rich people crazy?”

The other five don't laugh and they don't wonder. They're well paid: in fact, they receive the same salary as the President of the Italian Republic, plus board,

lodging, and unlimited hard candy. The hard candy is in case they get parched. So why should they think twice?

“Lamberto, Lamberto, Lamberto . . .”

What they don't know is that in every corner of the villa there are tiny hidden microphones to capture their chanting, wired to tiny and equally invisible hidden speakers scattered throughout the villa below. There's a speaker under the pillow in Baron Lamberto's bed, there's another in the grand piano in the ballroom. There are two in the master bathroom: one is incorporated in the handle of the hot water faucet, the other is in the cold-water faucet. At any moment of the night or day, whether he is in the library or the wine-cellar, in the dining room or the bathroom, Baron Lamberto can press a button and listen:

“Lamberto, Lamberto, Lamberto . . .”

At least once every half hour, the butler Anselmo also checks to make sure that upstairs, in the attic, work is proceeding without interruption, that the name is being pronounced accurately, that every syllable is being given its proper emphasis, and that the six workers are honestly earning their salaries and hard candy.

At first, the baron is less than fully satisfied.

“You have to admit, Anselmo,” he complains, “you can't hear the capital L.”

“Unfortunately, Your Lordship, there doesn’t seem to be a way of pronouncing upper-case letters differently from lower-case letters. Spoken Italian does have its shortcomings.”

“I understand, but it’s troublesome, Anselmo. The ‘L’ that begins my name sounds no different from the ‘l’ that begins leech, lizard, and lollipop. It’s dispiriting. I have to wonder how the great Napoleon was able to tolerate the fact that the very same ‘N’ that began his imperial first name shared the initial sound of namby-pamby, natter, and nosehair.”

“Or nursery, nausea, and nictitation,” added Anselmo.

“What is nictitation?”

“To open and shut one’s eyes momentarily and involuntarily, Your Lordship.”

The baron thinks for a moment.

“Well, at the very least, as they pronounce my name, they should try to see it in their mind’s eye, spelled with a nice big capital ‘L.’”

“That we can do,” said Anselmo. “On all the walls in the attic we’ll post big signs with your name written in block print, so they can see it as they pronounce it.”

“Good idea. We should also speak to Signora Zanzi about the way she draws out the second syllable of

Lamberto, and then clips off the third and final syllable. She sounds like a sheep bleating—*be-e-e-eh, be-e-e-eh*—and we can't have that."

"I'll attend to it, My Lord. If I may venture to do so, I shall also ask Signor Bergamini to be a little less emphatic in the way he punctuates each of the three syllables. There is, if I may say so, the faintest reminiscence of a soccer cheer: Lam-ber-to! Lam-ber-to!"

"Make it so, Anselmo, make it so. And do they have any requests for me?"

"Signora Merlo asks whether she might tend to her knitting during her shift."

"Tell her that she may knit, provided she doesn't count her stitches aloud."

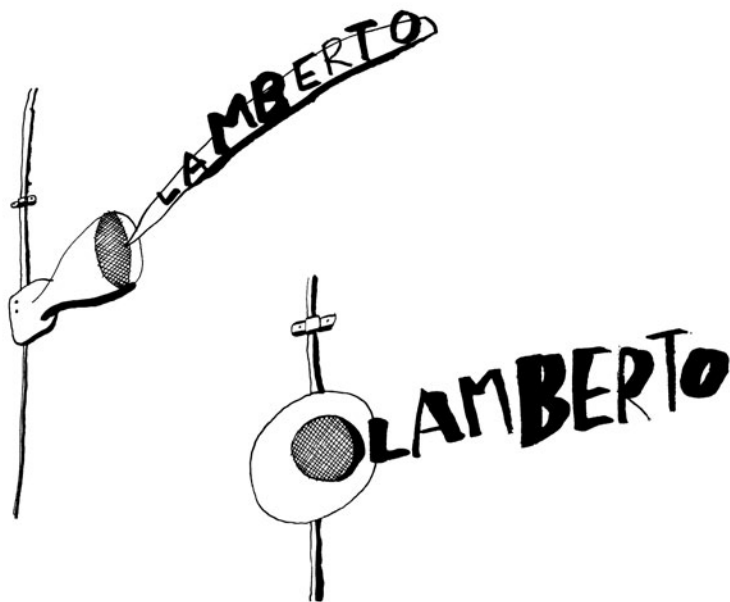
"Signor Giacomini asks permission to fish from the window of the northern mansard, which directly overlooks the water."

"But there are no fish in Lake Orta . . ."

"I pointed that fact out to him. I explained that the *Lacus Cusius* is a dead lake. He told me that he cares about fishing, not about catching fish, and that to a real fisherman, there is absolutely no difference between a dead lake and a live lake."

"Then he may fish with my blessing."

The baron gets to his feet, supporting himself with



his two walking-sticks, each with a solid-gold pommel, and takes three hobbling steps (his limp: no. 12) as far as the sofa. He drops wearily onto the soft cushions, pushes a button, and listens:

“Lamberto, Lamberto, Lamberto . . .”

“That’s Signorina Delfina’s voice.”

“Yes, Your Lordship.”

“What a lovely pronunciation. You can hear each letter so distinctly, and as you have surely noticed, Anselmo, every letter in my name is different.”

“Quite so, My Lord, and, begging your pardon, so is every letter in my own name.”

“And in your name. And in Delfina’s. I do like a name in which none of the letters appear more than once. Though other kinds of names can be nice in their way. My poor mother, for example, was named Ottavia, a name with a double ‘t’ and two ‘a’s. In her case, it made for a mellifluous effect. But I was always sorry that my sister chose to have her only son baptized Ottavio. Now, Ottavio begins and ends with the same vowel. The two ‘o’s create the effect of a parenthesis. To have a parenthesis for your name, think of that . . . Perhaps that’s why I’ve never really liked Ottavio. I can’t imagine leaving all my wealth to him . . . But unfortunately I have no other relatives . . .

“No, Your Lordship.”

“They all died before me, all but Ottavio. There he sits, just waiting to attend my funeral, of course. Any news of my beloved nephew?”

“No, Your Lordship. The last time we heard from him was when he asked for a loan of 25 million dollars to pay off a gambling debt. That was a year ago.”

“I remember, he lost the money at skittles, moral defective that he is and always has been. Well, well, would

you be so good as to make me a pot of chamomile tea, Anselmo?”

Baron Lamberto has the world’s greatest chamomile collection. He has chamomiles from the Alps and the Apennines, from the Pyrenees and the Caucasus, the Sierras and the Andes, and even from the high valleys of the Himalayas. Every variety of chamomile is carefully catalogued and stored on special shelves, with an index card indicating the place, year, and day it was harvested.

“I would suggest,” said Anselmo, “a 1945 Campagna Romana.”

“Quite so, you’re the expert.”

One day every year, the villa opens its wrought-iron gates and hardwood portals, and tourists are invited in to see Baron Lamberto’s collections: the chamomile collection, the umbrella collection, the collection of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings . . . Visitors come from all over the globe, and the boatmen of Lake Orta, who transport them across the water to the island in their rowboats and motorboats, earn bagsful of gold and silver.