



Giovanni Salvetti

ARTHUR AND THE UNICORN



Illustrations by Giovanni Salvetti

GIO

Giovanni Salvetti

Arthur and the unicorn

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Аннотация

Arthur lived in Bergamo, a city in northern Italy, around 1500. He was a good, hard-working boy but ended up in prison, the victim of some wicked, greedy men. But a combination of art, friendship and a smidgen of magic brought his nightmare to an end and saw him live happily ever after.

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Arthur and the Unicorn

The author, who also illustrated the book, is an international investment banker, perhaps the person you would least expect. Life is full of surprises....

All proceeds from the sale of the book will go to two charities helping children and young adults with cancer and serious blood diseases: Gift of Life (podari-zhizn.ru) and Tabletochki (tabletochki.org).

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Text and illustrations by Giovanni Salvetti

Translated by Denise Muir

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Prologue

When I get home early in the evening and am not travelling for work, something which happens a little too often I have to admit, my three children want me to tell them a story. This is how it works – they all get together in one of their bedrooms and lie on the bed or on the floor. I lie down beside them and we switch off the light. They take it in turns to choose the what the story will be about. For example, we've had the dragon and the vacuum cleaner, the pig and the rocket, and zombies in space to name but a few. I take a few seconds to think about it then start talking off the cuff, never quite sure where the story will take me. It evolves by itself. Sometimes it will be a short story, if I'm tired or it's late. At others it might go on for forty-five minutes or more. It depends on my imagination. I must've told about three or four hundred, possibly more, I'm not entirely sure.

One day they came up with the idea that, since some of the stories were quite entertaining, I should write one down. I promised I would.

And here it is in this short book. One of my stories. As I wrote it, a lot more details came to me than I would normally use when making them up on the spot at night. I hope I haven't spoiled the spontaneity of the more improvised ones we normally tell.

To complete the opera, I decided to illustrate it with my own drawings.

Please forgive the amateur but honest nature of this book, which has been neither edited nor revised by third parties, and also of the illustrations, given that I am neither a writer or illustrator.



Acknowledgements

In addition to thanking Lavinia, Oscar and Alessandro (in inverse order of birth this time! Sorry Oscar, you're always in the middle!) for being the inspiration for this and all my other stories, and for being my life's inspiration in general, I would also like to thank Mikhail Tsyganov and Aleksei Glugovsky who, in their free time, helped me to arrange the print, translation, online publication and everything else required to make this book a reality.

To Alessandro, Oscar and Lavinia (in order of birth!), the people I love the most in the world, and to Monika, who is raising them superlatively.

Arthur's family

Every morning when Arthur awoke, he'd splash his face with cold water his father had just pulled up from the well, pull on his shirt and trousers and run straight to the family's tiny chicken coop to collect the eggs. "Well done Arthur, you are a such judicious, careful boy. Since you started collecting the eggs, you haven't broken even one!" his mother would say. Eggs were important for Arthur's family's breakfast.

Arthur was born into a peasant family, the Bontempis, and they lived in the countryside outside Bergamo, a pretty Mediaeval city in northern Italy, between Milan and Venice. It was around the end of the 16th century, many centuries ago. Arthur was the fourth child of seven siblings – three girls and four boys – and he was eleven years old. In those days, families were much bigger than they are nowadays, especially among the peasant community. Children were seen as valuable as they could help on the farm when they were old enough. Living with the seven children and their parents was also old grandpa Guido, making ten of them altogether.

Life was harsh and lived according to nature and the changing seasons. The family would rise at dawn and go to bed just after sunset. The winter nights were long and cold and the land would be left to rest under the snow. It snowed a lot more in those days. In summer the days were long and hot and culminated in the all-

important harvest which took place in September. The harvest was crucial because the family lived mostly off the crops they had grown during the year and harvested in autumn.



The land they farmed did not belong to Arthur's family but to the rich Marquis Treccoli of Bergamo. The agreement, which was very popular in those days, was that the harvest would be split in two – half to Arthur's family who had worked the land all year, and half to the Marquis who owned the land. This agreement was called *mezzadria* in Italy, from the word “mezzo” meaning

half. The Marquis owned large swathes of land, not just the plot cultivated by Arthur's father, which made him very rich. He had inherited everything from his father who had, in turn, inherited it from his father and so on.

It was not a large farm that Arthur's family worked on, little more than ten hectares, which is roughly the size of two football pitches. Arthur's house was an old stone farmstead which stood bang in the middle of the Marquis' fields.

Arthur's father had also inherited the mezzadria from his father, grandpa Guido. In those days, things evolved very slowly. You knew more or less what you would become in life straight from birth, meaning you would be expected to follow in your father's or grandfather's footsteps, unless you became a soldier and went off to fight in battle. It wasn't like nowadays where everything changes at lightning speed. But sometimes magical things happened back then, like in this story.

The family owned two pigs, a mule, five chickens, two goats and an enormous dog called Ombra. He'd been given this name because of his all-black coat and dark eyes. If you didn't know Ombra and met him on the road, he was a frightening sight. This made him very useful because he would scare away any robbers lurking around the farm, making sure they didn't come back. Otherwise, Ombra was actually a friendly dog and had never bitten any of Arthur's brothers and sisters, not even when they were young and used to pull his tail.

In those days, the children of peasants didn't go to school.

The children of rich families had a private governess who would be employed to teach the children and given quarters in the family residence. The children of peasant families would learn a lot about the natural world and how to grow things from the land. Moreover, Grandpa Guido had lots of stories to tell. There were many more wars and battles back then and Grandpa Guido, before he became a farmer, had fought in several of them. He had seen and heard a multitude of things which made his stories fascinating.

In those days they didn't have televisions, computers or tablets like the one I'm writing this story on now. The only entertainment were the stories Grandpa Guido told after dinner, on long winter nights when the children would sit together around the fire to warm up and prepare for bed.

The family owned one book, just one! It was a beautiful manuscript on the history of art that a distant relative in Florence had bequeathed them. Arthur, the brightest of the seven children, would pour over it almost every day and marvel at the stunning illustrations of classic artworks. Moreover, Arthur never left his grandpa's side and would constantly quiz him about the battles he'd fought in, and the many soldiers, knights and castles he'd encountered. The family rarely went to Bergamo, only Arthur's father who was required to brief the Marquis regularly on how the farm was performing then, once a year, all of them would go after the harvest.

That would be a grand occasion because it was when Arthur's

father would sell his part of the crops. To celebrate, he'd buy the children a chestnut cake made in a pastry shop in Bergamo, a piece of fabric for their mother so she could make a dress, a little red wine for himself and Grandpa, and even a bone for Ombra to chew on. The children would run and play in the streets of Bergamo along with the children of the other farmers in town to sell their produce. On harvest day they would also buy a pig to be fattened over the next two years then slaughtered to make salamis and sausages for the family to eat during the year.

Mother Nature was their real master – she determined their fortunes and set their pace of life. Sometimes she'd be generous and give them the gift of good weather and bountiful harvests. At others, the weather might not be as good, either too wet or too dry. Then the harvest would be poor and they'd have to tighten their belts as food would be scarce but they still had ten mouths to feed. All things considered, they were happy with their simple life, surrounded by the gentle rolling hills and myriad of beautiful colours which would change with the changing seasons.

Famine

Sometimes Nature could be cruel. For no real reason, it's just how things were. It happened. One year, in fact, there was a terrible famine, which means it rained so little the harvest was devastatingly poor, less than half the amount they usually reaped. It had hardly rained at all that year and the summer had been very hot. The earth had turned to dust which clung to the farmers' sticky bodies. They did their best to save what crops they could from the drought. On seeing how bad the harvest was, Arthur's father quickly realized he would be unable to feed his family the next year. He thought he would ask the marquis if he could keep a little more than the half he was entitled to, if he promised to pay it back the following year.



Early one morning, Arthur's father set off for Bergamo in his carriage, drawn by the mule. About an hour later, he went through the San Giacomo Gate and under the high Venetian walls enclosing the city and which had just been completed. He headed for the palace of the Marquis. High up on the San Giacomo Gate was the winged lion, symbol of the Venetian Republic, which Arthur liked a lot.

Ubaldo, the Marquis' old manservant, opened the castle door and greeted Arthur's father.

"Hello Bontempi, what are you doing here? We weren't

expecting you,” he said, looking him up and down.

Ubaldo had worked for the Trecolli family for twenty years and was in charge of all the servants in the palace. He wore dark red livery which was a little frayed because the Marquis had not bought him a new set for years. Arthur’s father replied:

“I would like to see the Most Illustrious Marquis, I have something very important to discuss regarding the harvest. It was terrible this year.”

In response, Ubaldo said:

“Ah, I thought it might be this that brings you here. You are not the first farmer to come with unusual requests of late. But do not get your hopes up, Bontempi, you know the Marquis.”

Arthur’s father continued:

“Yes, I do but I have no choice. Please ask if I can see the Marquis.”

Two hours later, the Marquis finally received Arthur’s father. He was looking at some papers his clerk had brought him and without looking up from the table, addressed Arthur’s father gruffly, speaking sternly:

“What do you want Bontempi? I am extremely busy and have no time to waste.”

Arthur’s father lowered his head humbly and said quietly:

“As I presume you already know, Most Illustrious Marquis, the harvest this year was terrible.”

“Of course I know!” the Marquis interrupted abruptly, “I’m looking at my clerks’ report on the subject! So what about it?”

“Well,” said Arthur’s father, “I was wondering if Your Highness would be so magnanimous as to leave me three quarters of the harvest this year instead of half, and I will pay the difference back next year, maybe even with some interest on top so you will not lose anything. It would allow me to feed my family, otherwise I don’t know how we will survive.”

“Have you lost your mind Bontempi?” the Marquis snapped. “The rules have been unchanged for three hundred years and none of my forefathers has ever made an exception. I am certainly not going to be the one to start now. If I make an exception for you, everyone will want the same thing and I will have to give up some of my banquets, which I have absolutely no intention of doing, especially this year. Go away now and stop wasting my time, it’s almost lunch time already.”

Arthur’s poor father opened his mouth to speak but not a word came out. He was a simple peasant and did not know what else to say to the Marquis; he wouldn’t have dared either. Head down, he left the Marquis’ chamber and went down the stairs. As he descended, he passed waiters in blue livery carrying large, steaming plates of food upstairs for the Marquis’ lunch. There was stuffed pheasant, ravioli in a wild boar and mushroom sauce, vegetable dishes and a large hazelnut and blueberry pie. Arthur’s father had never seen such delicacies before and his mouth watered. He noticed there were only two waiters and they seemed to be struggling to manage all the serving dishes and decanters. He sat down for a second at the bottom of the stairs,

feeling lightheaded out of hunger and worry. He had no idea how he would feed his family on such a poor harvest. Then an idea came to him. He went back up the stairs and knocked on the door of the dining room.

Ubaldo opened the door and glared furiously at Arthur's father. Through clenched teeth, he hissed:

"What are you still doing here Bontempi? Can't you see the Marquis is eating? I hope you don't plan on interrupting him."

The Marquis heard the noise and said:

"Ubaldo, what's going on over there?"

"Nothing My Lord. Bontempi is still here, he wanted to ask you something but I will send him away."

The Marquis would normally not have received Bontempi again but the pasta in wild boar and mushroom sauce was so good, so very, very good, that it had put him in an unusually generous mood. In fact, he said to Ubaldo:

"Very well, let's hear what the annoying cretin wants!"

Arthur's father murmured:

"Most Illustrious Marquis, I deeply regret disturbing you again but I have an idea I would like to put to you. Would you consider taking one or two of my children as waiters for the palace? You have known my family for years and they are good boys. At least for a year, so I will have less mouths to feed."

The Marquis turned to Ubaldo and asked:

"Ubaldo, what do you say? Do we need waiters?"

Ubaldo thought for a few seconds before he replied:

“Well, actually, we are short on staff at the moment, especially after we fired those two waiters last month.”

“Oh yes, those two rascals!” Trecolli said. “We caught them eating my Taleggio cheese in the larder. So, what do you say, Ubaldo?”

“I say that I agree. We have known the Bontempis for many years, we know they are good people and that we can trust them. What’s more, we have many banquets planned for the coming year, as you well know, Most Illustrious Marquis.”

The Marquis wanted to find a husband for his daughter Caterina and was thinking of staging a large number of elegant balls and banquets to which he would invite the highest-ranking nobles from across the city and even the Republic.

“Nevertheless,” Ubaldo added, “I would suggest the Most Illustrious Marquis take only one child as a new waiter to be well-trained. He must be young and bright. I would say, a boy aged ten or eleven.”

Arthur’s father felt his heart break as Arthur’s face came into his head. He was the only boy of that age, there was no other alternative. The mere thought of not being able to see Arthur for a while saddened him. He thought about it for a while but when he saw impatience appear in the eyes of Ubaldo and the Marquis, he answered meekly:

“Very well, I can’t thank you enough. I will send you Arthur.”

On his way home, as darkness fell, a black shape came running towards the cart carrying Arthur’s father back to the farm.

“Papá, papá, why have you been away so long?” cried a cheery voice.

It was Arthur. He flung his arms around his father as soon as he climbed down from the cart. Tears welled in Arthur’s father’s eyes and Arthur noticed right away that there was something wrong. His father put an arm around his shoulders and said:

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