



Darker days and drunken nights

His early years were in many ways idyllic, but something more ominous lay ahead. Until his teenage days, George had been doted on by elders and shielded from family reality of massive debts and living beyond their means. It was all change when his grandad found a fresh spouse and George a new school. Then, darker times began to come to light.

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“Don’t you ever try this again you little bastard!” the father roared. “This boy is a hell of a lot younger than you. See the state he’s in. Some friend you are!” Then, one final haymaker and his son slumped to the floor, blood pouring from his nose. George looked on, his swaying body held aloft by the door frame.

The night had started as normal at the local church Saturday night youth club bash. Things had gone rapidly downhill from there; meeting up with a couple of *lads* at the back of the church hall, then relocating to the nearby *Barley Sheaf* saloon bar. The *lads* were almost legal, while George – bent on celebrating his fifteenth birthday – still had some way to go. This night was not his first night on the town by any means, but it stood out from earlier nights because it signaled a point of no return, where he said: *‘to hell with school and family’*. It was also the night that he was introduced to scotch whisky: an initiation he remembered from that day onwards.

Approaching midnight, George was struggling to stay vertical, partly because of the glacial conditions underfoot, but mainly because he was totally pissed. One of his friends from the pub was there still, with his arms around George's shoulder, trying to keep him aloft. The older boy failed miserably and they both collapsed in a flailing mess on the ice-cold concrete flagstones: quite a spectacle for the central street of this small country town, where the same two boys attended grammar school. Fortunately for George, no-one of consequence was there to see the infamous incident.

One wonders what happened to the young starry-eyed George: the angel-faced boy who topped his tiny village school and skipped home to help with the milking? That boy who dreamt at times of running an enormous farm with umpteen tractors and at other times of being the best cricketer, or top-scoring footballer in the world. Now he was becoming a Saturday night (and sometimes weeknight) drunk, who played truant from school, becoming learned in the finer arts of snooker - in an upstairs pool hall, near the centre of town - rather than algebra or science from his schoolbooks. At one stage he even gave himself a day off, with a couple of older mates, to see *Cliff Richard and the Shadows* on stage, in nearby Plymouth. This was an education of sorts, but not as it was supposed to be. What had gone wrong?

The answer appears to lie with the boy's changed surroundings. George was still a youngster with dreams, but his world - the world around him - had to some extent collapsed. Firstly, he had become a minnow of a fish in a large town grammar school, after previously being the blue whale in a small village set up. Then his family life changed dramatically, when his mother's sisters who took turns in looking after George, both moved out of the *Old Rectory* family house to get married. In addition to that and not long after the aunties disappeared, his doting father (in reality, his grandfather) suddenly brought on board a new wife. She was a fiery redhead from the North of Scotland, in her early forties and distantly related to the man's first wife, but many years younger than him. Together - and alarmingly for George - they quickly began to breed a bunch of new siblings. The fact that his cherished aunties had moved out and his adored

father figure had turned to new pursuits with disquieting results, had a devastating impact on the way George viewed his world ... and the people who lived in it.

These two aspects of change – school and home – seemed to work in combination, with disastrous effects on the young teenager. He excelled at Geography, the one subject he loved, topping the class every term. But George was tormented – persecuted might be a more accurate description - by the teachers of every other subject, who in effect delighted in plastering *Could Do Better* stickers all over his reports. In today's world they might seek to understand what had turned sour with this lad, who looked so promising when he first came to secondary school. But in that post-WWII atmosphere of the early 1960s, those old Victorian values still lingered on. Attitudes would change rapidly over subsequent decades, but when George was at grammar school, the mindset of school and staff was still grounded in the ethics of a bygone era. '*Just give him some more stick,*' was their main mantra, '*He'll come round!*'. This, quite literally, reflected the truth, because George got used to shoving a thick magazine down the rear of his pants each week, as he lined up for *Six-of-the-Best* from his nemesis ... the dreaded headmaster!

An example which highlighted this astounding mismanagement of a young child's future came around each term, when George was put on (what was termed) *Short Report*. This meant that for the first few weeks of the following term, he had to front up - cap-in-hand if you like - to the class teacher, to get scored a plus or minus for his performance during the week. Too many minuses translated to caning by the headmaster before home-time on Friday. It was a demeaning and soul-destroying system, which - as most people would realise today - caused the young boy to rebel even further. His best mate said to him one day: "*I can't understand it George, you topped the class for Geography and went up in some other subjects too, but they still put you back on Short Report! I don't think it's very fair.*" George didn't think it was very fair either!

At home, as well, the atmosphere was not entirely conducive to living peacefully and studying with intent. In the evenings in the big house there was a propensity towards very loud family fights, mainly about money (of which they had virtually none) and

management of the farm (which was a tussle between the old ways of the patriarch and the new ways of his son, who was actually doing the managing). In effect these events became shouting matches between father and son, usually accompanied towards the end, by one or the other storming off to bed, amidst a vigorous slamming of doors. At times George was unable to sleep, with booming voices and banging doors ringing in his ears. Looking back, it is really no wonder the youngster went off the rails, veering towards saloon bars and pool halls. No wonder at all!!

With 'O' levels, unlikely to be achieved and the errant teenager on the verge of being expelled from school; just when everything looked as though it was careering downhill towards a fate as they say, worse than death, George was thrown an exceedingly well-timed and opportune lifeline: his *get-me-out-of-jail-free* card. Later in life he would wonder about the timing and who instigated it, but at the moment of happening it came as an unheralded, but glorious relief from a downward spiralling circumstance: an overdue Houdini-key to open his underwater padlocks.

"Come and sit down for a minute George." His (grand) father was sitting at the kitchen table, beckoning to him.

It was a weekend, and George - almost sixteen at that stage - planned to travel by train with friends, to watch *Plymouth Argyle* (the local team that they regularly went to support) play an FA Cup 3rd round tie, against league leaders Tottenham Hotspur. This was one of the biggest games ever in this part of the world, and promised to include his hero, *Jimmy Greaves*, as the star for *Spurs*. It was a Saturday so after coming back, he planned to go out with his mates for a few drinks. God knows what time that would end.

So George was in a hurry and dressed for the part: black leather jacket as a fashion statement - but also to withstand the January cold – *winklepicker* shoes (the pointed leather *must-haves* of the day) and hair slicked back like Elvis, another hero of the moment. The young man was certainly not inclined at that point in time, towards any family chats: loving or otherwise. In fact, in those days, he had begun to communicate

less and less with his father and clearly avoided getting too close to him, as had been quite normal just a couple of years before.

“There’s a letter from your sister Dorothy. She’s inviting you to Australia.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” George pulled up in his tracks, already halfway out the door. Within seconds he had put two and two together. *“Hey, that’s different.”* He said to himself. *“A ticket out of here. Out of this mess of a life. That would be fantastic!”*

So somewhat begrudgingly, George went over and sat down at the table, next to the man who had taken care of him since he first came into the family as a tiny baby in a cardboard box. The blue airmail letter (the main means of overseas communication in those days) talked a lot about life in Australia and what the family - Dorothy, her husband John and their two children - had been doing during the Australian Summer. Towards the end, on the turnover back page, he came to the bit he was most interested in. *“We would like to invite George to come and stay with us for a while,”* it read, *“It’s a great life here and I’m sure he’ll love it, but he can always choose to return to England if and when he wants to.”*

George re-read that bit a couple of times. Geography was his thing and travel his ambition. It was like manna from heaven.

“Sounds great. When do we start?” were his only words of response as he, rather abruptly, pushed back the chair, his mindset now back on the five-star football match with his weekend mates.

Teenage years are not always the time for close reflection, but if he had taken a few seconds to look carefully, before he stormed off, somewhat reinvigorated by the news from Australia, George would have seen a tear forming in his grandfather’s eye; his father as it was, for the past sixteen years. George had shared *dad’s* bed and sat on his knee at the dinner table; the only one permitted to drink from the patriarch’s huge white, pint-sized mug. This once tall, white-haired man, could see he was about to lose his

blossoming youngster: the angel-faced boy he had loved and cherished for all those years. He knew he would miss him dearly, but he also realized paradoxically, that by marrying again and fathering even more children at an older age, he had been the one to cause George to distance himself ... and probably it seemed to leave, perhaps forever. For in his heart the ageing man, by then well into his sixties, knew he might never see the boy he loved so much, ever again.

A few months later, George stood on the deck of the newly commissioned P&O liner, *Oriana*, waving to his family way down below, on the dockside. They had travelled together from Cornwall to Southampton: four of them plus George, in his *dad's* small estate car. Now, the engines of the ship growled, as the massive vessel moved sideways, away from the quay. One by one the streamers from ship to shore snapped and lingered in the breeze, before dropping down towards the dark waters below. In a more contemplative mood, George could have spotted the analogy to be drawn from this, for in fact it was the moment when the young man, just halfway through his teens, cut ties with the old country and threw his lot in with the new: that land of opportunity *down under*: Australia.

George recalls those turbulent times that ended with him waving goodbye to Cornwall and striking out for the lucky country.

“My secondary school days began with a dose of excruciating embarrassment (similar to the soiled underpants episode, during my first class, when I was just six years old). It was an omen perhaps of things to come! After being anointed to attend the esteemed Grammar School halls of learning - where the lucky few were separated from the unlucky rest, who trudged off to attend the nearby ‘Secondary Modern’ - I recall on the third or fourth day being singled out by the class teacher and asked to come to the front. He grabbed me sharply, by my left ear, with the sole intention of looking behind it. “Filthy boy!” he said, loud enough to create a spectacle for the whole class to hear ... and causing them all to laugh uproariously. “Wash behind your ears tomorrow boy, or you will sit outside the whole day.” The next morning, with freshly scrubbed ears, I listened in awe, as Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space, circled the Earth!

The ears incident heralded the start of the rot, during those grammar school days. It was indeed a forewarning - or veiled prediction - that my life to come was not destined to be all plain sailing, and that indeed there would be a few serious bumps and potholes to navigate along the way. I guess it's the same for most people - life is not always easy - but in my case, over the years since my thwarted abortion, it feels as though I've had to deal with a host of extraordinary incidents, scattered across various countries and continents, and several decades in time. Some people have an easier ride, some I guess harder; I have never had to deal with real poverty or exist in a war zone. Looking back to those earlier days, I can only surmise that life is experienced according to personal circumstance, and while being acutely relevant to each person at their own level, it bears no direct comparison to individuals in other spheres, or at alternative levels.

In hindsight, it's hard for me to sum up in a nutshell what went wrong. I think it must have been the coming together of so many factors that seemed to change me from the starry-eyed eleven-year-old - playing 'Mole' in a stage play of 'Wind in the Willows' for my finale at the local village school - into an unrecognizable clone of Elvis, less than five years later, with oiled hair styled into a 'quiff', along with clothes and surly attitude, to mirror 'The King'.

During this time, when I seemed almost to morph into an alien being, there were still many glimpses of the old me: the OK me. Like when I was out on the farm with my older brother, who became in effect my first, and perhaps most important mentor (much later I was shocked to discover this man was in reality my uncle). I never stopped loving those lush green slopes, with the haybarn at the summit and primroses flowering down below, near the riverbank and in the hedgerows, to herald the coming warmth of Summer. After school I would huff and puff while climbing 'Great Hill', to fetch the cows, then stumble down the rocky, high-hedged lane, in wellington boots behind the herd. Each of the fields had a distinctive name - Dudley Hill or Outer Oxner Park for example - and many of them I came to know intimately, while sitting for hours on the tractor seat, ploughing or harrowing their dirt. I also grew to know each one of those dairy cows in that herd -

their names and their natures - which at that time was only about twenty-five in number. Some were leaders, most were followers; in those days some still had horns and could turn on you - like a bull to a matador - but most were docile. After milking, my job was to shovel the discharged shit and straw mix, onto an enormous heap just outside the dairy door. With hindsight I can say I loved all of it, even shoveling the shit!

Over ten years, I developed a close affinity with the land, which to a certain degree fashioned my later life. It was only back inside the grand monolith of a house on top of the hill, after milking and stumbling up 'The Break', behind my 'brother', when everything changed, and I reverted to a worse than stereotypical teenager. Then I was faced with my grandfather - who had posed as a very loving father for as long as I could remember - plus his fiery new wife and their fast-developing brood of children. That was the moment when it all fell apart. Most teenagers we all know, can become a bit surly, distant, hard to handle I guess; but I was something much more. Banished at home, black-balled at school: it was not a good situation to be in, and I have to admit I did not respond with flying colours.

After spending one year to get to know the town grammar school - when we were all mixed up across three classes - for the second year I was relegated to the third (and lowest) stream. My family was non-plussed, but I guess it was partly my own fault; I didn't do enough homework, and then only really concentrated in class when my favourite subject, or teacher, came along. Geographical studies were tops, and other 'arty' type subjects not too bad, such as art itself, history and 'English Lit'. The rest - from my warped reasoning - all deserved to be binned. So that's where I put them!

In the third stream, and without very much effort, I didn't do too badly; usually well within the top ten overall. But it was the 'without-much-effort' part that turned teachers against me; and not just one, but almost all ... except Geography of course. From the second year on there was a pervading attitude from them that I was lazy, which prompted most on a persecution track, to make me see the light, so that I might perform up to my recognized potential. But their methods were almost totally ineffective: where today we

understand the value of praise to bring out the best, they only understood the value of put-downs and oppression, which with me was a route to eek out the worst.

Before long I began to take debatable refuge in the disguise of class clown, which annoyed these masters and mistresses even more. I remember one art class, when I encouraged my partner for the day, to help me collect all the paint dishes and keep them on our desk. After a while, the rest of the class were searching for paints which were piled high on our desktop. We had hardly touched a paint brush and were both thrown out of the class by Miss Yule, an elderly female teacher, almost in tears. That escapade, which I regarded as an outstanding success, resulted in a visit to the headmaster's office for a caning: something which I was quite familiar with by that stage.

However, it was the days and nights out of school, which probably set the seal on my impending expulsion. I became friendly with boys two or three years older - regarded, even by some of my classmates as not the best company - and through them began to know the pubs that would serve drink to under-age patrons, plus the snooker hall, which turned a blind eye to students playing truant from school. By fourteen or fifteen I had attained a remarkable proficiency at billiards, snooker and pool, and could hold my own at the saloon bar. It was not a route to success, that's for sure! An unauthorized trip to see Cliff Richard and The Shadows, on stage at The Plymouth Odeon during their hay day of No. 1 hits, probably enabled good old Jimmy Lingard, the cane-wielding head, to tap the final nail into my expulsion coffin. Myself and my delinquent mates were fairly and squarely nobbled and accused of truant. For me, it was one offence too many.

But the downward slide was interspersed with some fantastic memories. During the summer before leaving Cornwall I managed to find my first real job, along with Roger, a best friend. Our task was to clean caravans every weekend, before the next week's holiday makers invaded the hill-top park, which overlooked the picturesque fishing village of Polperro and The English Channel. Each Saturday through that summer we would set off to cycle the four or five miles through the Cornish lanes - on our highly-prized racing bikes, with the smells, the sounds and the excitement of summer in the air

- taking turns to surge into the lead as we pushed hard for the next bend. That, I remember, as one of the best feelings from those early years.

A few days before leaving Cornwall, one of my sisters - an auntie of course, at a later stage - gave me a camera and a few spools of slide film. I was elated: one of my dreams was to possess a camera. So, I spent the best part of two days photographing my family of that time, in the Cornish setting that I knew so well. It would be the last time I would see my grandfather (alias father) and more than eight years before I would return – a twenty-something Australian, with a down-under accent to match – to re-unite with a somewhat estranged family. I had moved on to become an agricultural advisor, covering a territory as big as Scotland, while they had grown into their marriages, with kids everywhere, and all with that strange West-country voice, that I also used to own.

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I stayed for a while on deck as the big ship ploughed down The Solent, out into the English Channel, excited about the voyage to come and the places I was going to see on the way. But those high spirits were quickly dampened during the first night when we hit a violent storm, whilst tracking southwards across the Bay of Biscay. Lying on my bunk, I recall watching a white towel, suspended from a hook on the wood-grained door of my small two-berth cabin, swinging from side to side: moving in tune with the grand ocean liner, as she rolled in the enormous swell.

The next day, anchored by Gibraltar's Rock was a complete contrast, with millpond waters under a cloudless sky. I leaned over the railings, watching as small boats ferried people back and forth to Oriana. Then we were on our way again, and just one day later I found myself wandering the back streets of Naples. For me it was an enthralling experience: as if the texts from those Geography lessons in the past – which I had always been captivated by - were coming to life in real time.

Back on board, I was finding my sea legs and becoming familiar with the ship's layout. Intrigued by the daytime disappearance of my forty-something cabin-mate – whom I only saw when snoring - I decided to scout around and try to find his hide out. Then, as we

were crossing the Mediterranean from Italy to Egypt, I spotted him by chance, in one of the ship's many bars. He invited me for a drink, and the barman seemed not to object (considering my young age). When I asked for a scotch and soda my cabin-mate also didn't bat a lash. "My choice too," he confirmed. "Cheers! Let's drink to that." From that day on, the pocket money I had carried with me from Cornwall, reduced rather rapidly.

By that stage we were leaving Europe, destined for more exotic ports. Before entry to the Suez Canal, in Port Said, I remember bartering with the traders who stood in small boats full of mustard-brown and russet-red leather bags, one of which I bought, the money and the purchase being shuffled up and down on a long rope. Later, SS Oriana led a convoy of some 30 ships down the canal to the town of Suez, stopping on the way in Bitter Lake, to let another convoy going Northward, pass buy. The incredible heat of that day was a forerunner of what was to come in Australia.

Then quite amazingly, after tracking South from Suez, we made an overnight stop in Aden, where an old friend from the Cornish village school I had attended some years before, came on board to take me ashore for a tour of the town, plus a meal amongst camels and dimly lit souks. It was his first posting in the Royal Navy. He was 18 and I was 16. Incredible to think that just a few years before, we had been playing catch in the primary school playground; now we sat as young men, talking and smoking sheesha, with the bright lights of Oriana - anchored close to shore - as a glittering backdrop.

Leaving Peter to help keep the Union Jack flying in Aden, the good ship Oriana and I ploughed on across the Indian Ocean to Ceylon, another (former) British outpost. It was a particularly rough section of the journey, bringing back memories of that first night in the Bay of Biscay. But little did I know, there was even worse to come!

After 24 hours in the tropical heat of Colombo - where on-board friends were surprised to bump into me, a young lad wandering the streets alone - we all resumed back on board for the longest sea-leg: a six-day, straight line journey South to Perth. For a few days It was all deck games and smooth going, then on the day prior to arriving in Fremantle - the main port - we started to run into bad weather, which turned into the

mother-of-all storms (our third and decidedly worst of the journey). This meant the big ship had to 'hove to' (which I think is the nautical expression for stop and wait for things to calm down) for a full twelve hours, until the wind and the waves had reduced enough to allow the local pilot to board, so that Oriana could be steered into port.

After that it was a short two-day hop, across a relatively calm and tranquil Great Australian Bight, to our destination port: Melbourne. There, I was due to meet the family who had invited me to stay (and unknown to me at the time, my mother, whom I had last seen more than ten years before).

Viewed in hindsight, I sometimes feel the short three-week journey from England to Australia had contrived to change that stropky teenager into a blossoming adult. I had stood on deck as S.S. Oriana pulled away from the Southampton dockside, a somewhat grouchy and gangly youngster; then from the voyage, which traversed vast oceans and took me to exotic ports, I was afforded a privileged glimpse of an adult world, which amazed and inspired me. When I looked out from the deck, as the massive ship crossed Port Phillip Bay, and then slowly edged into the Port Melbourne quay, it was as if I had begun to inhabit a new, more adult persona.

The journey had hinted at an exciting world, beyond my prior conception, and I felt the urge from somewhere deep down inside, to put the past few years of turmoil behind me, so that I could respond without constraint to a future of new horizons.

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