

Darker days and drunken nights

His early years were in many ways idyllic, but something more ominous lay ahead. George was doted on by his elders and to some extent shielded from the family's reality, which was all about mountainous debts and living beyond their means. Everything changed when his grandfather found a new spouse and George found a new school. Then darker times began to come to light.

“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 with one final haymaker the son slumped to the floor, blood pouring from his nose. George stood at the front door, his swaying body held aloft by the door frame, as he looked on.

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 and 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.

It was approaching midnight and George was struggling to stay vertical, partly because of the icy 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 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 it.

One wonders what happened to the young starry-eyed George: the angel face boy who topped the 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 fast-bowler or top-scoring footballer in the world. Now he was a becoming a Saturday night (and sometimes weeknight) drunk, who played truant from school to master the fine arts of snooker in an upstairs pool hall, near the centre of town. What had gone wrong?

The answer appears to lie with the boys changed surroundings. George was still a boy with dreams, but his world, the world around him, had to some extent collapsed. Firstly, he had become a very small fish in a large town grammar school, after previously being the biggest fish 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 Scottish redhead, distantly related to his first wife and many years younger than her new husband, who 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, had a devastating impact on the way George viewed his world ... and the people who live in it.

Thus, these two aspects of change – school and home – seemed to work in combination, with disastrous effects on the young teenager. He excelled in the one subject that he loved – Geography – topping the class every term. But George was tormented by the teachers of every other subject who plastered '*Could Do Better*' stickers all over his reports. In today's world they might seek to ask: '*What's gone wrong with this lad who looked so good when he first came to secondary school?*' But in that

post WWII world, where the old Victorian values lingered on, they just said: *'Give him some more stick and he'll come round!'*. Quite literally in fact, because George got used to shoving a magazine down his pants, each week when 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, George would have to front up to the class teacher to get scored a plus, or minus, for his performance during the week: the minuses translating to a caning by the headmaster. It was a demeaning and soul destroying system, which 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 you're on short report again! It ain't fair."* George thought so too!

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, usually accompanied towards the end, when everyone stormed off to bed, by 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 young chap veered off the rails!

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 descending into hell, George was thrown an exceedingly well timed lifeline (later in life he would wonder about the timing of this and who instigated it, but at the time it came as a glorious relief).

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

It was a weekend and George had plans to travel by train with friends, to Plymouth, where the local team (that they often went to support) were due to play an FA Cup 3rd round game against league leaders Tottenham Hotspur. This was one of the biggest games ever in this part of the world and would include his hero, Jimmy Greaves, as the star for 'Spurs'. He was in a hurry, dressed for the part, with hair slicked back like Elvis (another hero of the moment) and certainly not inclined, at that point in time, towards family chats. In fact, he spoke very little to his father nowadays and didn't like getting close to him, as he had done a year or two before.

"There's a letter from Doris. She's inviting you to Australia."

"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!"*

Somewhat reluctantly 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) said a lot about life in Australia and what the family - Doris, husband John and their two children - had been doing over the 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's a great life here and I'm sure he'll love it, but he can always choose to go back 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 pushed back the chair, heading for the 5-star football match with his weekend mates.

Teenage years are not often the time for close reflection, but if he had taken the time 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 his 'dad's' bed and sat on his knee at the dinner table. George was the only one allowed to drink from his huge, white, pint-sized mug. This once tall, white haired man, in his late sixties, could see he was about to lose the young boy he had loved and cherished for all those years.

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: five of them plus George in his dad's small estate car. Now, the engines growled, and the massive vessel moved sideways, away from the quay. One by one the streamers between ship and shore snapped and lingered in the breeze, before dropping down. If he had been 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 the ties with the old country and threw his lot in with the new: that land of opportunity 'down under'.

The three-week voyage to 'the lucky country' produced a raft of indelible memories, snippets of which George recalls:

"I stayed for a while on deck as the ship ploughed down 'The Solent' and out into the English Channel, excited about the voyage and the places I was going to see on the way. But my high spirits were dampened that night when we hit a violent storm, whilst tracking across the Bay of Biscay. Lying on my bunk, I recall watching the towel, suspended from a hook on the 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 'The Rock' was a total contrast, with millpond waters under a cloudless sky. I leaned over the railings, watching as small boats ferried people back and forth to the big ship. Then we were on our way again and just one day later I was wandering the back streets of Naples. For me it was an enthralling experience; my Geography lessons 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 whereabouts of my older cabin-mate – I only saw him when he was snoring - I decided to scout around and try to find where he was hiding. Then, as we were nearing Port Said 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 drink too," he said. "Cheers! We'll drink to that." After that, the pocket money I had carried with me from Cornwall seemed to reduce rather rapidly.

In Port Said, with the ship tied to the dock, I remember bartering with the traders who stood in small boats full of colourful 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 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, In Aden, 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 and a meal amongst camels and dimly lit souks. It was his first posting in the Royal Navy. He was 18, I was 16. Incredible to think that just a few years before, we had been classmates in primary school; now we sat talking (and smoking!), with the bright lights of Oriana, close in to shore, as the backdrop.

After a rough crossing of the Indian Ocean and 24 hours in the tropical heat of Colombo, where friends from the ship were surprised to see me, a young lad from Cornwall, wandering the streets and bargaining with shopkeepers, Oriana turned South, for a six-day voyage to Western Australia .It was smooth going and deck games most of the way, until just outside Fremantle the main port, where we ran into the mother of all storms and the ship had to 'hove to' (which I think is the nautical expression) until things calmed enough for the pilot to be able to board and steer us into port. After that it was a comparatively short, two day hop to my destination port of Melbourne, where I was due to meet my family (and unknown to me at the time, re-unite with my mother, who I had last seen more than ten years before)."

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