



# **George and the Dragon**

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By Anthony Aikman

This is a story about George -Big George some people called him. But those who remember Big George the red haired baboon at Rome Zoo in the Borghese Gardens and are expecting to hear about further exploits of this hirsute Ape will be disappointed. For this Big George although a primate was a presidential one, and president of one of the most, if not the most powerful country on the planet. And just as George was at the pinnacle of his personal power so was his country.

There was one threat to its security- Global Terrorism. Big George- so named not only for his size but his habit of riding roughshod over the opinions and sometimes the territories of others when it suited him and who was totally oblivious to criticism of any kind had received a nasty shock. Terrorism, which until then had always been the problem of other countries, had suddenly come home to George's capital with a capital B for bang. Not only had the prestige of the nation suffered a mighty blow but so had the prestige of George and he didn't take these affronts sitting down, no sir! He had ordered an all out war on Global Terrorism and its chief perpetrator, a wispy bearded but highly elusive figure who despite thousands of troops combing thousands of miles of harsh land, special forces, networks of secret agents, surveillance devices, continued to evade him. Like that fictional character the Scarlet Pimpernel, this only too real identity not only eluded George but taunted him with taped messages that were broadcast on television channels in all those parts of the world where he was regarded as a hero by the underprivileged masses and George was derided as an arch bully. Worse, if there could be worse was the suspense of not knowing where, when, and if the enemy would strike next. George had bullied together a whole crowd of reluctant world leaders in a crusade against terrorism but the suicide bombings, attacks on embassies, tourist resorts, multinational companies continued and George was growing weary trying to think up new phrases to describe these "outrages", - his speech writers needed a whole new Thesaurus to come up with verbal tonics to soothe the increasingly restless and critical public opinion.

One day when George was out fishing at his country retreat he discovered tucked under a seat of the boat an old newspaper, and as the fish weren't biting and George was getting restless he opened its creased and yellowing pages to read about forgotten ball games, and athletic heroes of yester year. As he scanned the pages he came upon a small article about a remote country in a remote region of the globe where it was reported that although the inhabitants had no contact with the outside world they spent their spare time praying for it. "Heck, they ain't getting much results," thought George briskly, chewing on a cheeseburger and breaking into a six pack of up-country malt ale. "Pray harder, boys, a whole lot harder." Then as he surveyed the placid surface of the reedy lake he began to wonder why he had never heard of this country before and if nobody had got around to invading it then perhaps he should. For its own security of course. Perhaps the locals would welcome a regime change. He glanced back at the article and carefully cutting it out decided to look it up later in his atlas.

Back at the ranch George went into his den and dug out a well worn atlas covered with margin notes and question marks chiefly concerning the possible location of his

terrorist enemy. Finally with the aid of the index he discovered his quarry. "Well," he exclaimed to his old spaniel, "who'd have guessed a country the size of a fly speck ever existed. The name was too hard to pronounce so George didn't try. It appeared mountainous but bordered the ocean on its westward side. "Perhaps the fishing is good," he considered," and if the folks pray for us they must be a decent bunch. Perhaps we should get them on our side." Further reading encouraged him. The country was neutral, not a member of the U.N., and didn't have obvious political set-up, no monarch, president, nor (George's great bug-bear) - a supreme religious council. Back at the office George called in his Secretary of State, "Bill," he asked him, "Who's the head of this 'Shangri La' country." And he showed him the newspaper cutting. Even Bill took a little while to remember "It was after the World War. Some sort of uprising against an occupying power. A queer bunch took control. A leader from outside. A westerner I think. A very charismatic fellow with prophetic powers- or so it was said. There was a drive back to the land. The towns were abandoned. No oppression, nothing for the outside world to get excited about. They did away with currency and flags and asked all foreigners including diplomatic to leave. And they've been virtually cut off from the rest of the world ever since."

"So what language do they speak, Bill. Some kinda gobbledygook?" Bill chuckled. "Heck George- the odd thing is they are reckoned not to speak much of anything. It's said they get along reading each other's thoughts. Probably, if they were tuned in, they could be reading ours this very moment. Apparently distance has nothing to do with it." George frowned and they turned to other business but later when he was practising his putting on the lawn outside the notion came to George that if there really did exist people who could read the thoughts of others, then they could also know where they were. This idea so excited George he stopped putting, tugged his spaniel's ears in a friendly fashion and returned to his study where he summoned a puzzled secretary who returned clutching a bundle of maps. "These are all I could find, Mr President. I called the National Geographic who said their requests to do a magazine article had got no reply. Apparently there are no roads. A track leads up to the southern frontier which is a deep river gorge with dense forest beyond. I believe there's a bridge of sorts but there's no trade in or out." "But surely people go in?" George persisted thinking hard. The secretary shook her head. "I don't think anyone has been in for years. Whether they are turned back, or can't negotiate the wilderness, or are scared somehow, I wouldn't know."

George dismissed her. He sat alone with the maps, pondering. George was a Boy Scout at heart. He liked maps with blank spaces. Particularly old maps where in those empty spaces might be written "Here be dragons." So Bill worked his way through the maps and a six pack of ale and discovered a lot that appealed to the adventurer in him and nothing to cast doubts. "Heck, I'm due for a holiday, but I can pretend this is a visit. Surely these people will feel honoured by a visit. As for this leader...." Here George was more doubtful. All he had from archives was a grainy black and white photograph of a young man from forty years before. "Looks a bit like Lawrence of Arabia or rather than actor, now who was he?" There was no doubt he was a westerner. "One of us," concluded George. "Perhaps after all these years of isolation he'll enjoy a good chat. I wonder what I can take him? A bottle or two of rare malt whisky and some cigars?"

Next day George called in his secretary and consulted his schedule. The next few weeks were free of important engagements. It was the holiday season and anything could be handled by his deputy. So George proceeded with his plans. From his den he got together his old climbing gear, a favourite saddle, camping equipment, well

worn boots and of course his fishing rods. Confiding in as few people as possible and with a press 'black-out' , (according to the official statement released he had 'gone fishing') George organised a very low profile visit to the country neighbouring what he decided to call (since he couldn't pronounce its real name)- Shangri La. Apart from fears that terrorists might attempt something, kidnap or assassination, his aides were privately horrified about their chief taking off into the jungles but no one dared voice such concerns in front of George.

So with as little fuss as possible George set off on the presidential plane, landed and whisked off by military helicopter to the frontier zone. Within twenty four hours he was on horse back heading a mule train along a mountain tracks between snow capped peaks towards his unknown goal. In the early afternoon of the second day the small party descended into a rocky gorge with towering cliffs overhead and a blue river dashing over rapids far below. For a less experienced horseman the path would have been perilous but George had the advantage of being mounted on a sure footed beast. In the end even he had to dismount and join the local guides on foot. In time they reached their destination, a slender suspension bridge built entirely of ropes, planks and bamboo that swayed like a slender thread across the deep gorge separating the two countries. Even George's stout heart skipped a beat at the prospect of having to cross it and his security guards paled at the sight. Even the baggage mules refused to budge despite all the threats and cajoling of the guides. George held up his hand, "I'll go first," he announced sounding more confident than he felt for the planks were unevenly spaced and badly secured, and although George was leading his mount it only had to lose its footing to pitch both of them in the river far below. The horse snorted, the rickety bridge swayed and George prayed and cursed equally as he clung onto the rope and bamboo railing and edged his way over. Sweating with fear and exertion he finally gained the far side and turned to wave forward the rest of the party. Despite a lot of confusion no one actually set foot on the bridge. George shouted and someone called back, "It's no use George, none of us can seem to get a foot on the darned thing. Come back George maybe it's a trap."

"I'll drag them over if I have too," he thought, hitching his pony to a branch and setting off back the way he'd come. "George," appealed his aide, when he reached them, "It's not that I don't want to cross, - I can't. Pull me if you like. Pull any of those ponies, but our feet won't budge. It's as if we're stuck." "Magic spell," said the guide sternly. "No one ever crosses to other side. Magic wall." "Well I did," George retorted. "Because they expect you," declared the guide. "See," blurted the aide. "It's a trap. What did I say. Drop it, George." "Hell with that," retorted George, "Perhaps it's an invitation. I'm invited and no one else. I get the open door but for you it's slammed shut." "Perhaps," agreed his aide doubtfully, "But I don't trust it. It's too risky." "Not for me it isn't," declared George who rather liked the notion that only he should be permitted to enter the forbidden land. "Tell you what. You fellows camp here. I'll go in, if I can. Give me one week. That's not too long. I'll be back in one week." And without waiting for an answer George strode back purposefully onto the bridge and swayed and clawed his way across more problems. Now it was the horse that refused to budge. George used all the tricks and ploys he knew but he had to admit defeat. "Damn it, I'll not be licked," he declared and unloading his baggage he shouldered what he could and left the rest. The horse at once headed back across the bridge to join its comrades and George with a wave turned his back on them and faced his next challenge, the jungle.

What at first glance appeared a dense wall of tangled scrub, creeper and trees was not quite as impenetrable as it seemed, and hoisting his backpack firmly onto his broad shoulders George found he didn't have to hack his way through with a machete. It was almost as if the screen of branches and briars shifted just to permit him to squeeze past. George whistled in a bemused and exultant sort of way, except when he turned round to find the jungle closed ranks tight behind him. "No way back, George," he told himself, confidently adding. "Press on." Fortunately it was cool in the forest and the path such as it was did not climb steeply. Instead it seemed to wind and wriggle like a corkscrew burrowing an entry between the steep jungled slopes on either side. Anywhere else, George thought, you would see signs of people passing, sweet wrappers, beer cans, cigarette butts. Not here though. This was pristine wilderness indeed although after a couple of hours of steady slog George was grateful to reach a glade beside a stream where he could through off his pack and quench his thirst. And he wouldn't have objected to someone offering him a six pack. Then something happened. Instinct told George he was no longer alone. Looking up cautious but alert he found himself regarded by a group of boys on ponies studying him carefully.

George was relieved no longer to be alone and he proffered kids to armed bandits so he greeted them cheerfully but although they smiled they uttered not a word. Nonplussed George started on a pantomime of gestures to explain his presence but cut it short when one of the boys waved and a spare pony trotted forward. "Now isn't that the darndest thing," he thought puzzled. "It looks as if they were expecting me."

This pony like the rest had no saddle but as George had grown up riding bareback this presented no problem except his long legs nearly reached the ground and trying to keep them up soon provoked unpleasant aches. A second pony was brought forward to take George's pack and then without a word the group headed forward along a clearly defined track.

Now George had not got where he was in life without being a believer if not in signs and portents at least in Lady Luck. Luck, he concluded cheerfully was on his side and he didn't regret his decision to push on alone. He was certain he was destined to be here. And he remembered the advice of his Secretary of State," George, those people don't speak- they can read each others' thoughts, and yours."

For the rest of the day the small group continued through the forest stopping occasionally for the ponies to rest and drink, and for George to stretch his long shanks, or rather to try to stop them stretching any more from their endless dangling without stirrups. Late in the afternoon with sunlight slanting through the trees they reached a broad glade where it became clear they would pass the night." I'll show them a few old scouting tricks," George thought, but he never got the chance. A boy led him to a bamboo ladder that squeezed him between branches to a platform built into the tree's canopy. George would have fished out his bedroll but the boy pointed to a hammock. George tested his weight cautiously but it took it and he found himself comfortably lying back gazing up into swaying patches of leaves and sky where an early half moon was already palely shining. Shouts and laughter alerted him and looking down he saw kids had stripped of their sarongs and were diving into the stream. He heard his name called and saw them beckoning, so he heaved himself out of the hammock, clambered down the ladder and followed suit. The kids laughed at his reticence to strip. As a kid George had enjoyed 'skinny dipping' at the local waterhole but he wasn't a kid anymore compared to these young athletes and he didn't need to advertise the fact or lose his dignity. He was content to relax in the shallows and watch the gang gambolling and plunging from rocks, swaying from creepers, laughing together like kids anywhere. Later they all sat on the platform and

picnicked from the ample contents of their woven baskets; sticky rice stored in bamboo tubes, fruits, wafers of dough, boiled sweetcorn and yams, stewed noodles and vegetables. It wasn't exactly what George would have thought up for an evening barbecue on the ranch but just now he was too hungry to care and even the lack of a six-pack didn't trouble him unduly as he lay back in his hammock and watched the stars break out overhead.

He was woken by more cries from the stream but he didn't join them. He felt stiff from his first day without a saddle and didn't relish a second so that he surprised and pleased to find the pony furnished with makeshift rope stirrups into which he gratefully rested his feet. All day they made rapid progress through the forest and arriving in late afternoon at the banks of a broad river bordered by cultivated fields emerald green with a young rice crop. The path now became broad enough for high wheeled bullock carts that they passed lumbering slowly along. Everyone waved and George raised his big stetson hat and waved back. The folk in carts and those labouring in the fields seemed much darker and gaunter than his young guides.

Other tracks converged and now there were thatched huts on either side, built on stilts with outhouses piled high with nets, wooden ploughs, cut fodder, heaps of corn husks. Hens and ducks squawked, geese hissed and the occasional cow eyed them in solemn ignorance as they passed. They entered a gateway and halted in a yard where as George dismounted he found himself approached by an older person, although still in his eyes little more than a youth. He smiled courteously and indicated George to follow. "You know," George declared as he was led into a room with mats to sit on. "Those kids you sent were a great bunch but I'd really like to meet someone older - someone who is in charge." The youth regarded him with an amused smile. "Someone older?" he queried. He spoke in such a familiar accent that George was taken aback. It might have been his own brother addressing him. "Just how old?" There was something in the way he said it that made George doubt his own eyes. The truth was that he too had wondered about the real age of his supposedly young guides. They may have had the bodies of kids but when he saw them looking at him with their grave eyes they seemed much older than their apparent years and he had no doubt that was able to discern much more from his thoughts than he wished.

"Well take you," George said more confidently than he felt. "Now you look a bright intelligent young man. I guess you'd like to know why I'm here." "We know exactly why you are here," came the unexpected reply. "And," he continued "You are only here because you hope we can help you. And also because it is possible you can help us." "Now you're talking 'turkey'," said George with a grin. "So how about you take me to your leader so that we can get down to business." But now it was the turn of the young man to be unsure. "That may be a little difficult." "Why," George demanded with just a hint of his bellicose manner that always had his aides alarmed. The young man however seemed quite undaunted. "Who are you expecting to meet and what are you expecting from him?" "Who he is, well I'm not quite sure, but I'm told he has this rare gift of farsightedness and I'm going to ask him if he'll help me find these darned terrorists." The young man nodded, "Farsighted- that's an interesting way of putting it. But," he acknowledged, "accurate too in a manner of speaking. The problem is that the leader is no longer the person you may be expecting. However," he added briskly, "I will take you to him and you can judge for yourself." Getting up he guided George out of the hut, across some muddy courtyards towards the river bank where a wooden jetty led to a small tiled pavilion. "Please don't appear surprised," he cautioned George, "And please don't say anything. I will explain afterwards."

They crossed to jetty and came to the pavilion which was open on four sides. Inside sitting upright in a hammock with his legs straddled over the side sat a small child of perhaps three years with pale blue eyes who gravely watched them approach without any expression other than the faintest smile. The young man bowed. George resisted the temptation to speak. They waited a few minutes and then backed out passing on the jetty a rather burly monk with shaven head and red robes. Here at least was someone George's age or older and as they passed George was sure he had seen his face before, or seen in the newspapers. "Yes, it is the Dalai Lama," the young man declared. George whistled, wondering what he was doing here."

They didn't speak until they returned to the hut where George blurted out his pent up irritation. "That infant out there isn't the leader." He tugged out of his pocket the old black and white photograph from forty years before. The young man seemed slightly amused by George's bluster. He glanced briefly at George's photograph, "Yes, that is our leader," he admitted, "And there hasn't been what you people call a regime change." George shook his head in bewilderment. "That there leader would now be my age, older, old as that monk we passed. Are you suggesting he died and there's been some kind of re-incarnation."

There was a pause. The young man said, "I want you to visualise the face of the child in the pavilion. To help let us portray him on the space in front of us." And to George's astonishment in front of him as if on some invisible screen stood out the face of the child. "Now," continued the young man, "we introduce an image of your photograph." A second picture, an enlargement of the photograph appeared beside that of the child. Both faces were the same size. Looking from one to another it was quite clear they were the same person; the child and the man it became. Then a third picture appeared, much older, hair receding, face drawn and lined, but nonetheless the same man. "So where's he now," demanded George. The young man was silent.

At that moment the monk entered the room, smiled, bowed and sat down legs folded on the mat. He looked at the young man and it seemed to George that they were silently communicating. "His Holiness visits from time to time to see how he is," offered the young man in explanation. "And how is he," said George feeling unusually baffled. "Better," announced the Dalai Lama in rather guttural accent. "Younger and better," he added jovially. "He is forgetting everything. I don't think you will need to go back any further." "Go back," said George. "Go back to what?" "To the divine spark,-the spark of awareness and unawareness that is the core of our being and the secret of our unbeing," replied the monk, adding briskly, "Had you come a few months ago you would have seen someone you expected. Someone in outward appearance my age or your age. With the attributes of inner vision that you are so anxious to tap. But a person also tormented by memory." "So what have you done," jibed George, "put a spell on him. One of those Alice-in-Wonderland spells out of the fairy tales." The monk smiled benignly. "You could say a spell. Yes that would be a way of putting it. Or a trance. We prefer to think he put the spell of detachment on himself. You see for some years now he has wished to be detached. Do not think detachment is a luxury only for hermits in caves. Once one has sought detachment you can work, play, love, build only it does not control you. It does not dominate you because at last you realise these things are only illusions. There are some religions where priests chant mantras in a secret tongue ordinary people revere but cannot understand, and perform rituals to gain enlightenment. But to seek detachment, to seek the divine spark in us which is No Thing there is no need to speak, to chant. Our prayers are silent and within us and our thoughts are shared, not our words." He smiled at George. "When you go fishing with only your spaniel I'm

sure you prefer a companionable silence to someone chattering." He paused, "Detachment from reality-is it possible you ask? Of course because reality itself, the reality we perceive around us is an illusion. We only assume it is reality because we are attached to it and fail to see it is a trap. That is how clever a trick it is. Reality fools us into believing it and into trusting it and declares that anything else is unbelievable, whereas in fact the irony is that true reality is a mystical or to most people an unbelievable reality." After a pause to allow a bemused George to get his thoughts around all that, he added,"Complete detachment is to return to No Thing." He went on," Not nothing. Nothing is negative. The No Thing from which Every Thing comes, from which everything is possible and quite free from the limitation and confines of something."

"You've lost me," confessed George who had been trying hard to understand.

"Oh, I don't think so," the monk added lightly. "You are a religious man. You know your bible. How out a void the world was created. Out of No Thing came everything. If there had not been No Thing there couldn't be Any Thing."

"I think the Bible puts it somewhat differently," said George," But if I get your drift. I'm not sure the scientist who talk about the Big Bang would agree."

"Ah," smiled the monk," Is that theory so very different. In a fraction of a second the Universe was created and grew. Before there was nothing. Some might consider this No Thing like a divine spark, a spark of creation that all creatures possess within them. Others speak of enlightenment, seeking to follow and fulfil this divine No Thing back to its source. The ambition of everyone must be detachment from self not attachment to it. There were philosophers of old who declared 'Man Know Thyself'. This is sheer arrogance. Man can never know himself. To know anything he must first unknown himself; put himself right out of the picture. Man's self is his own enemy not ally. Get rid of it and you will have a chance to be free."

"Get rid of myself," thought George. "That would be sheer lunacy. It would be like suicide. Without myself what am I? Certainly not Big George. The whole notion sounded somehow like treason."

The young man was speaking. "Some religions claim God is outside us, others declare God is inside us. But if God is inside-a divine spark that can be fanned into a divine fire- He must be outside too. For where did the divine spark come from? The Creator lives in His Creations- his Creatures." He paused before resuming. "Our concept is that God is No Thing and we seek to discover the divine No Thing within us and to be re-united with the No Thing outside us."

"But nothing still seems kind of negative to me whichever way you twist it," objected George.

"Not at all. Nothing makes everything possible. It is something, a thing, any thing which has limitations. No thing is limitless. Does not the Christian gospel say 'In my father's house there are many mansions'. Not in my father's mansion there are many houses. That is limiting. But rather 'in my no thing is every thing'. That is limitless. As I already suggested it is 'thing' that is negative, or limited. Every 'thing' has its limits. You cannot fly however much you might wish to. You can only live so long, only run

so fast. But 'no thing' has no limitations. For 'no thing' everything is possible. That," he added quickly, "is what he was seeking. Complete detachment. Only of course it is not possible for mortal men." "Why?" George asked greatly mystified. Now it was the turn of the young man. "The mind," he tapped his head. "The mind; victim, ally, consort of the body, fellow conspirator. The mind prevents detachment and unfortunately if we possess a body we also need a mind."

"You can purify the mind," commented George. "I remember at Sunday School we were always told to purify our minds. Trouble was," he added, "We were too busy trying to peek up her skirt to pay much attention to what she was saying."

The monk smiled, "So does it work. Even with the best intentions doesn't the mind sneak back, tempting, suggesting. Memory is its greatest asset. It can always blackmail us with memory. No, we may purify the mind and hope to look ahead with a clearer vision but lurking in the background is always memory to pull us back."

George nodded grudgingly, "But you need memory. Without my memory of events and people and politics where would I be." This his audience conceded with grave nods. George was baffled but it was not in his nature to be baffled for long. "So are you trying to tell me you leader-if I may use the expression, is rejuvenating himself if such a thing was possible-in order to eradicate his memory?" "Exactly," agreed the young man in delight. "Now you understand."

"That's where you're wrong. I certainly don't understand. For a start it's impossible."

"Why," responded the young man. "These guides who we call Guardians and who you decided were children and I who you call a youth. It would surprise you if in your years we were older than you."

"It certainly would," answered George.

"And yet you are no doubt aware of that unfortunate condition that affects some people who age prematurely, are little wizened old men at ten years and die before their teens. Couldn't it be the other way around."

"No," said George, "Although I'm sure the scientists will discover an ageing gene before long and slow down our....." He didn't finish. He looked carefully at the young man and suddenly his doubts vanished. The eyes that watched him so intently and read his thoughts before he had even put them into words, they were not the eyes of a youth. These were eyes that had watched and grown wise over many long ages. George frowned. "So why isn't he like you- your leader?"

The young man explained. "He isn't one of us. He is one of you. But he has certainly mystical attributes that set him apart."

"And then there are the others," said George gesturing outside. "The farmers in the bullock carts, the fishermen tossing nets. They look old and worn out."

The young man nodded. "They too are not of our kind."

Now it was the turn of the Dalai Lama. "You see me here, but if you went now to Dharmasala in India and asked for me. They would say I was meditating, and if you insisted they would take you to a room and you would see me in a state of meditation, of total detachment which makes it possible for me to be here. The child you saw in the pavilion has gone through detachment. It was necessary for two reasons. The second is that he could escape from the burden of his memory. By eradicating word by word, thought by thought, as you would delete memory on a

computer he has been slowly brought back to where he is now." He deferred to the young man. "And this is his healer."

George nodded in reluctant resignation. "I guess I accept what you say even if I can't understand it, or perhaps it's the other way about. But the fact is as you know I came here hoping for help so there's no point in pretending I'm not disappointed when I realise I won't be getting it, certainly not from a three year old with no memory."

The Dalai Lama smiled, "Oh but you may. You may. Our only concern is that your questions shouldn't upset the healing process he has undergone. Unless I am misreading your thoughts that you want to know the whereabouts of this terrorist so that you can capture him although in doing this you are no doubt aware you will provoke fury among the many millions to whom he is their hero."

"Yes," the young man agreed, "it is possible providing you have a clear picture of this person that you can present but without all the diatribe and arguments associated with him. Such accessories will merely confuse Him. Just focus on the person and if he is sympathetically inclined he may tune in on that person and relay directly back to you and us what he sees. Then we will take over and trouble Him no more. No, there is no need for you to return to the pavilion. This can be resolved here and now" He produced a very small crystal rather like a smooth opal." I want you to put this lightly in your ear. It will enable you not only to see our thoughts but also the thoughts of those you wish to locate."

George put the crystal in his ear and was amazed at the effect. Instantly his mind was flooded with visions and voices. It was rather like one of those cheap multi-waveband radios where all the stations interfere with each other. The pictures he was getting were also overlapping. Suddenly out of the jumble of images came one clear picture. It was as if George was inside a cave looking out, while facing him sat a number of turbaned figures speaking excitedly in an unfamiliar language. George pulled the opal out of his ear.

The Dalai Lama smiled somatically. "I think we have made contact but it is hard to begin with. A bit like a bombardment. When you enter someone's thoughts you are looking out as he is looking out. In order to see your adversary you must transfer to one of his colleagues. Concentrate on the face of one of them and you will look at him who you seek." George followed these instructions and instantly found himself watching as if across a room straight at his mortal enemy.

The advantage of the crystal once George had mastered it was he could switch around from person to person simply by concentrating on them. Much later he learned other uses but for now just to be, as it were, in the same room and indeed the same mind as his enemy was exciting enough even if he didn't understand much of what they were actually thinking. He removed the crystal. "But where are they?" he demanded.

The young man smiled, "Follow the thoughts of the man who just went out." And George doing just this found himself outside the cave in a rocky gully where a donkey stood tethered to a bush and a path wound up the hillside. Soon after he glimpsed a village of low mud brick houses. "But this doesn't tell us where it actually is. Once again the young man came to his rescue, for he had discerned the name of

the village and had already located it in the wider picture of the area. This picture he transmitted to George enabling him to see the dusty plain and the distant glint of a winding river with mountains beyond. A road passed through it all heading north east and George could see a line of army trucks moving up it. Concentrating on the mind of the driver he found himself entering a lurid conversation about the merits of certain bar girls.

The young man broke into his thoughts to advise him. "Now you should transmit what you have seen to an officer in charge on the ground. To make it convincing it should seem to come via satellite 'phone link from his superiors. What you need to ensure swiftness. Don't worry about the noise of attack helicopters, they will simply alert the terrorists who will draw a camouflaged screen over the cave mouth, which is perhaps why it has never been detected before. But there are security cameras and these must be shot out otherwise the assault will be keenly watched by those inside the cave. Perhaps a large net may be useful if a helicopter could contrive to drop one over the entrance just in case in the confusion some one escapes." George faithfully found himself repeating all these instructions into the various minds of commanders, captains, sergeants, privates until to his delight he could actually see the helicopters approach, see the anxiety at the cave, the screen pulled across, the special forces lowered onto the hillside behind, the security camera blasted so that those inside the cave anxiously watched blank screens. Finally as the screen was pulled back and everyone inside tried to run, he had the pleasure of seeing his enemies tumble headlong into a large net. It was suddenly over and George shouted out "They're in the bag." But a glance at the young man stopped him from cheering. "What is it?" The young man appeared very concerned. "Their thoughts reveal something deadly. There is a nuclear device waiting only their order to be detonated by a suicide squad in your capital city. It needs only one signal or news of these means' capture. So if you value a million lives of your people on no account must news of this capture leak out. If it does the bomb will be detonated and the city will be divested. Quick, send the order." George feeling a panic that left him trembling did just this, all the while watching the face of the young man who was concentrating all his powers of thought to read the minds of the captured terrorists and gain the information he sought. "Help me," he cried. "I don't know your city. You must read my thoughts."

Once again George replaced the crystal and concentrated. Images transmitted from the terrorists to the young man revealed a busy street, a shabby sidewalk, a passing yellow cab and then by sheer luck a road sign. Next he was peering into an alleyway full of unlearned litter bins. Two men lounged outside an entrance. "That's it!" cried the young man. "Wha'do we do?" begged George, helplessly. The young man suddenly smiled, "We'll put some temptations into their minds. Suicide bombers often want to satisfy their lusts before they blow themselves up." And he started to introduce lurid fantasies of scantily clad girls dancing in glaring lights to loud music. The men seemed to agree and shouting something into the doorway, George watched them amble off down the street. "Follow them," cried the young man. So George struggled to keep his mind focused on the men while his fears were centred on the bomb. He saw the men enter a bar and watched as they chose their girls and went upstairs. "Get the room numbers," called the young man. "And now think of somebody in the F.B.I. - they must be quick but no blaring police sirens. There's still the guard in the alley."

So while George, drenched in perspiration was concentrating on giving orders to whoever he could think of, the young man kept his thoughts on the guard. "They've busted the brothel," George called out. "And bagged the buys. What do we do about the guard?" "We need to find a couple of muggers or druggies. There. Look. Those

two about to have a fix. Get them to ask the guard for money and mug him. Quick, quick before he can detonate his belt....." The moment of sheer terror passed. George saw the guard lying unconscious. The police and F.B.I. arrived. Officers dived down a short flight of steps into a cellar where behind some trunks under a hap of sacks the deadly device lay. It was over. George removed the crystal from his ear and the world which had been exploding inside his head with orders and counter orders for the last two hours fell suddenly silent. He felt quite limp with fatigue and stepped outside into the village street. Bullock carts trundled past and the evening sun gleamed on the river. His gaze moved to the jetty and the small pavilion now in shadow. Could the mind of a three year old really have been responsible for what he had just experienced?

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George returned a National Hero to his people and an Arch Enemy for much of the rest of the world. But before he left 'Shangri La' something occurred that would soon change this. It all began with a long conversation with the Dalai Lama. George knew what was coming- the liberation of Tibet from decades of Chinese repression. Sure, he knew this was something politely mentioned in diplomatic circles and communiqués to satisfy the Freedom Rights movements but not offend the Chinese cadres, or make them lose face. Tibet was their problem not his - until now that is. Trouble was he 'owed' and he knew it. Of course he tried to wriggle out of it. "Palestine," he insisted. "Surely that's much more important." But Palestine can wai, he was told. Settle the Tibet issue first. How. Why even now, he was informed, the Chinese leadership were divided and undecided. Some thought it was better to strike a deal with the Dalai Lama and his mild non-violent rhetoric. "But I don't know the issues involved," George persisted. The Dalai Lama merely pointed to George's precious ear crystal. "All you have to do," he advised, "Is read my thoughts and the thoughts of the Chinese. Ah, and another thing we did not have time to teach you before was that the crystal will also help you instantly learn the language of whoever you are thinking about. So you will astound the Chinese by talking to them without an interpreter." George gazed with new respect for the tiny multi-coloured crystal. "Just what is this thing." "Call it a sort of accessory," suggested the Dalai Lama. "We don't need it because we can read thoughts at will. It is designed for those who cannot. But use it sparingly. Misuse it and you will suddenly find it ceases to futon. Above all never, I repeat never ever try to read the thoughts of any of us and in particular of the boy in the pavilion-the leader, as you called him. That would trespassing indeed." George nodded. Once he was back home he forget the promises about Tibet that he made here. But when he did return he found events had preceded him. He was informed that the Chinese were anxious to speak to him about a contentious issue. "Tibet," he said wearily. "I guessed."

Within a couple of weeks a visit to Beijing was arranged but by now George had recovered his abundant energy and had also discovered by using the crystal not only vital information about Tibet but the worries and doubts and fears of individual Chinese leaders. What no one could have expected happened when his presidential plane touched down and George emerging smiling and confident with a megaphone in his hand waved to the crowd and greeted them in fluent Chinese. He told everyone how delighted he was to be there and how he looked forward to discussing matters of mutual concern with the leadership and also how much he admired and was interest to learn more about the traditions and culture and ancient wisdom of this great country. There was a moment of astonished silence before the crowd went wild with delight. George descended the steps to greet the waiting delegation of leaders.

The official hovering interpreters found themselves with nothing to do. It was George chatting amicably in Chinese who translated back into English to his team what was going on. A little girl presenting a bouquet nearly fainted when George complimented her. The Guard of Honour was inspected with George tossing out appropriate praises to please his hosts. During the ceremonial motorcade in the city George lowered the window and called to passers-by.

It was not only the Chinese leaders who looked worried. George's home team seem disconcerted. At the embassy the Secretary of State said to Georges, "Where did you learn Chinese. I thought the only words of any foreign language you knew was 'Bon Jor'." George just grinned. "I thought I'd surprise you fellows." "You certainly did," came the reply.

Next morning in the Great Hall of the Emperors they got down to business. "Gentlemen," George declared in his flawless Chinese, "I realise the anxieties you are have over resolving this long standing and difficult problem." He did too, with the aid of his crystal he had been listening in to the concerns of each member of the Central Committee and the Chairman himself. George was in a position to rebut an argument before it was even raised. In these discussions George placed special emphasis on tradition and history in which he knew the Chinese took such pride. In fact everyone was so impressed by his faultless knowledge both of Tibet and China that he quickly gained their confidence and was almost able to enter discussions as one of them and not an outsider.

An autonomous Tibet- one country and two systems such as in Hong Kong and Macau. That was the goal, and if it worked with Tibet then think of the far greater prize- Taiwan. If the people of Taiwan could see autonomy granted to Tibet and the Dalai Lama return to Lhasa, the Tibetan Capital many of their fears about reunion with the 'motherland' would be removed. A far greater and more influential china would arise with its constituent parts united in one country but with autonomy of culture, language and internal self-government granted to different identities. What an example to the world. Instead of a pariah when it came to human rights it would be considered a hero. "Perhaps we should invite the Dalai Lama to join us," he concluded. "He has already been invited," he was told, which of course he knew anyway from their thoughts otherwise he wouldn't have said it. "He joins us for formal discussions tomorrow."

So the Dalai Lama came, talks resumed and resulted in a general agreement. So swiftly were these proceedings that it was even decided the meeting should conclude in the Lhasa itself and that the Dalai Lama should return at once to his people. George remained in China while preparations were underway, making visits to the Great Wall and the huge new 'Three Gorges' dam on the Yangste River. Then he boarded his presidential plane for Lhasa to follow the Dalai Lama and Chinese leaders.

The celebrations and rejoicing even astonished George who was well used to ovations and ticker-tape welcomes. The huge walls of the Potala Palace were draped with banners and the street thronged with exuberant Tibetans and cheering crowd. On the steps of the Potala Palace George shared the podium with the Chinese leaders and the Dalai Lama. Once again to everyone's surprise, his own included, he spoke in fluent Tibetan. He spoke of the historical ties between Tibet and China and trusted that any enmity from recent years would vanish in a spirit of compromise and

co-operation for the benefit of everyone and then stepping into the streets he surprised himself yet again by dancing with a group of performers and singing a rather bawdy song in Tibetan, reflecting it was a good thing the folks back home couldn't understand.

Back home, George pondered his greatest gamble, Palestine. The Jewish lobby and the Southern Bible belt held considerable political clout and made it clear they were certain that he would support Israel through thick and thin. A few months ago George would have been of much the same opinion but these days he had a different vision. With the aid of his 'magic' crystal he was able to discern genuine grievances and genuine aspirations and hypocrisy and cant. George decided against all the advice of his cabinet to pin his colours to the Palestinian cause. It was the closest he came to a cabinet revolt and a mass resignation. "If I can't pull it off then blame it on me. But listen we've got a billion Arabs and Moslem sympathisers against us right now and a few million Jews for us. We're not ditching the Jews, we're just giving back to the Arabs the lands the Jews took from them; the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the right of return for refugees except with enough generous inducements many won't want to take up that option and will be happy to settle on the West Bank. Trying to get the Israelis to agree to anything is impossible. So, whether you like it or not I'm going to lead a popular uprising."

Before his colleagues could get over the shock announcement George had already flown to Egypt and from there to Gaza, defying the Israelis to stop him. There was pandemonium and dismay in Israel and astonished rejoicing and disbelief among the Palestinians. George found himself at the head of a vast motley ragbag army of enthusiasts heading straight through the Israeli barricades, daring any soldiers to shoot him. He made his position clear to both sides speaking in fluent Arabic and fluent Hebrew. A homeland for the Palestinians and in return respect for the nation of Israel. Any attempt to threaten the security of Israel would come up against his determination to protect it.

It was a fair deal and everyone except the most hysterical orthodox Jewish settlers could see that. Now with the reason for terrorism removed and the chief terrorists captured one of the greatest threats to national security vanished and the confidence this inspired resulted in a resurgence of the economy so that the promise of prosperity became a reality for all to share.

George had achieved in a few short months more than anyone would ever have believed possible. He retired to his ranch retreat and went fishing with his beloved long haired spaniel and a six pack of beer beside him. But even as he reflected on all that had happened since he had last been fishing there something continued to haunt him. It was the face of the child in the pavilion on the river. They said there were two reasons for making him young again and the second was to purify his mind, to remove the obstacle of memory. So what was the first reason. At the time he had not thought of asking but now the question puzzled him. Why had a man his age been brought back to being a three year old. This main reason-what was it. Not so he could develop as a great athlete surely. George fingered the crystal. He knew he had promised never to use it to find such things out. But he had to know. On an impulse he put it into his ear and.....nothing. A complete blank. It might have been a pebble.

"Well I deserved as much," he told himself, only this didn't solve the question. "I just have to go back and find out myself," he decided.

This time George left with even less fuss or fanfare than before- and even then it was little enough. He politely asked his wife to come along on his proposed fishing trip knowing full well she had appointments booked every hour of the day for the next six months. And she loathed fishing. Fishing was to be his excuse. "I'm going fishing," he said leaving his deputy in charge, and nobody could grudge him after all he'd done. Just to seem convincing he did take along his favourite rod. "You never know," he thought those streams may be teeming with fish."

All went well until he reached the frontier. This time he chose to go alone since he knew the way but when he reached the gorge he was dismayed to find the bridge had partially collapsed. Perhaps there's been an earthquake or the rains dislodged it, for by now the seasons had changed and violent storms lashed the mountains. Certainly there was no chance of his pony making it across since half the flooring planks were missing, so he shouldered his pack, and very carefully climbed out onto the perilously swinging structure. Every move seemed to cause more disintegration; boards fell off, ropes and bindings frayed and snapped. He was less than half way when with a crack like a whip the whole structure sagged, shaking so violently as to throw him off his feet and leave him hanging from the tangle of ropes. He struggled to haul himself up while the bridge trembled and jerked as if it was trying to bodily toss him overboard. "I've got to lighten up," he thought. There was nothing for it but to sacrifice his precious backpack, but even that took some doing considering his perilous position. He finally managed to slip the straps first off one shoulder, then the other and watched it crash in the river far below. Instantly the bridge felt less taut. About ten feet away was the worse frayed section and he inched along until with a sigh of relief he got to a firmer part and began to pull himself up to the far side and safety.

He had been hoping against hope that someone had read his thoughts and that his previous guides might be waiting for him, but they were not. However in the clearing behind the first dense thicket of scrub he did discover a rather unkempt pony munching the grass. Now George knew horses and he didn't have to have been born and raised among them to recognise this one. "Phew," he whistled in relief, for this was indeed the very same that he had ridden all those months before. It had come to fetch him.

There were no rope stirrups now so George simply had to make the best of it, ditching his heavy walking boots to reduce the strain and letting his bare feet dangle. But he felt encouraged nonetheless as they set off along the winding path into the heart of the country. That evening they reached the same glade where he had camped before. The platforms were still up the tree but no hammocks or signs of friends or food. "Just have to tighten the belt," he said to himself. He bathed in the stream but it wasn't the same without the whoops and laughter of the kids and besides the rain was teeming down. Despite being soaked through he slept and shivered through the night on a bed of scooped up moss and leaves, and next morning continued towards the great river which he finally reached in mid-afternoon. The farmers in the fields and the families in bullock carts waved and called out greetings but George without the precious crystal to pop in his ear couldn't understand or speak a word.

The early evening sun was shining over the river under lowering clouds as George reached the settlement. For some time he had felt uneasy by the complete absence of the paler skinned youthful 'guides', but his dismay really began when he found the settlement deserted. This is not quite correct for the local inhabitants had taken it over but there was no sign of his former friends and without the ear crystal to communicate he could gain no information from the villagers as to where they had gone. He walked along the river bank and found the jetty but the pavilion had vanished as if swept away by the flood.

George concentrated his thoughts. People just don't vanish they must go somewhere. The problem was where? The villagers fed him hospitably and even supplied him with rope sandals but when he tried by signs to find out where the others had gone they just smiled and shrugged. George had never been further than this settlement but he realised he now had to continue and the pony seemed ready to oblige. It was the lie of the land that decided his direction. North and east rose tall forbidding mountains, south was the way back. George chose to head west and the pony offered no resistance. For a while they followed the river until they reached a place they could ford it. From here on the farms became less frequent, the fields gave way to scrub and dense tropical forest overhead the narrowing path. Crossing low hills the ground became rockier and the forest thinned. Frequent downpours drove in from the west as if defying them to continue. That night George tried to build himself a shelter of sticks and leaves but it was not very effective. The dawn was grey and overcast and he was getting more pessimistic that he would find anything. Still he knew the ocean lay ahead and oceans invariably meant fishermen and fishermen meant boats.

As George jogged along dripping wet and feeling less optimistic of his chances of success as each hour passed he kept recalling things the young man had told him during that first visit. How 'only by losing knowledge could wisdom be discovered,' well that scarcely seemed relevant now. What he wanted was the rain to stop. And then another thing came to mind, 'to forget everything you used to believe in is the secret to discover the source of understanding'. There was something in this that did ring true because likes it or not George was forgetting just about everything he ever thought mattered. That all seemed unimportant compared to his quest for the something unknown. Wherever that was.

Drawing nearer the coast an inner voice kept rebuking him, "To be detached you must shed all attachments!" it shouted. While over and over one imperative kept drumming itself into his tired mind. "If I could launch into nothing, into nowhere. I could get anywhere." So what was he expected to do. Throw himself off a cliff, close his eyes and hope. It was easier to think these things than to achieve them. But still the idea appealed as if all he needed to do to escape the present reality and be released into another was to take the plunge.

George's hopes were further dashed a few hours later when wearily pony and rider descended a ridge and faced suddenly by a vast grey horizon of ocean they also looked down on a deserted and uninviting shoreline. They dropped into a curving bay where George would have dismounted but the pony shied and trotted towards a rocky headland. As there were no reins George had to let it have its way. The headland was a waste of rocks but the pony turned nimbly this way and that picking its way through on a barely discernable path until dropping into a gully where the breaking seas swirled in and out, George found himself on a ledge leading to the shelter of an overhang. He patted the pony... "Good old boy," he murmured, "Cover

at last." But at this very moment to his astonishment the pony stepped straight into the sea. All George could do was to grab a hold of its shaggy mane and hold his breath as they both plunged underwater.

It seemed only seconds but when they surfaced and George gasped and spluttered stared ahead, instead of grey sea he found himself in shallow crystal clear water under a bright blue sky with a dazzling white sand shore ahead and low wooded hills beyond. He slid off the pony which kicked up its heels and cantered off in a cloud of spray to vanish over the sand dunes.

George stepping out of the shallows followed the prints of the pony over the dunes but it had vanished. Ahead he saw cultivated fields and a dirt track. He no longer felt weary but invigorated. The sun was shining but it was not too hot. More like a morning in late spring back home. He passed people working the fields and cottages shaded by clumps of trees. Women carrying babies held them up to wave and George waved back. The track entered a village where folks were gathered around a market. Here he was offered food and drink and although he didn't exactly recognise what it was he found it refreshing and filling. He also noticed how similar the people looked to his previous 'guides' and how extraordinarily youthful they looked. Even the mothers looked like schoolgirls.

It was with growing confidence that George pressed on. He knew he had found what he was looking for. This surely was the island to which those people had migrated from and where they had now returned. George was a bit hazy when it came to geography so he didn't need to doubt his theory, except he was puzzled that from the mainland he hadn't spotted this offshore island, or that the weather had shifted so dramatically. But George's memory was getting as hazy as his geography, the past week, the days of weary wandering seemed a blur he didn't care to dwell on especially since he felt a sort of youthful exuberance he hadn't known in years. As he padded along the dusty highway birds sang in the trees and George sang too. Irvine Berlin's song "Never seen the sun shining so bright....." He was still singing when the highway became busy with fellow travellers all heading towards what appeared a distant town. George had no difficulty communicating with his companions. Although he wasn't sure if he was speaking their language or not he seemed to understand everything in their thoughts. And when they did reach the low mudbrick houses it seemed only natural and neighbourly that should invite him in, offer him a bed and share their meal with him. Later taking an evening stroll George was impressed not only by the warmth of the people but of the friendliness of the town itself. There were no buildings of more than one or two floors, and most had courtyards full of flowering shrubs and shady trees. It was in one of these modest but charming houses that his hosts took him to meet the 'young man' from 'Shrangl La', George was delighted at this re-union but he was pleased he wasn't questioned about what had been happening recently as the recent past was getting increasingly blurred. One thing remained clear. "The boy in the pavilion I keep feeling his gaze on me I came back to see what happened to him." "I know, I know. We had to make it difficult for you. You had to be certain. Now you are here you won't need the crystal anymore. You are already one of us. As for the boy- yes, I can take you to him. He has been living out at the waterfall. You will find him changed and rather unpredictable. He is now very much his own master again. But the waterfall is a long way off and I must make preparations. So in the meantime enjoy the city. You will discover there is no sense of hurry here."

This was true enough and George was content to stroll around at a leisurely pace. There were no vehicles rushing around. At every intersection there were squares with benches to rest on and kindly people to chat to. One delightful feature was the labyrinth of canals. Here gondolas and sampans plied carrying people and goods, while through the very heart of the city flowed the curving river. Along its paved or grassy banks small thatched tree houses stood where in the evening people relaxed at ease and musicians played lutes and flutes and xylophones.

It was at one of these teahouses that the young man met George early one evening. He came to tell him they would leave for the waterfall next day. As they sat gazing over the river the young man remarked. "You noticed the absence of palaces and temples and memorials. We don't go in for such things. And since everyone can communicate so easily with everyone else we manage things by consensus." George nodded but his thoughts were elsewhere. "This waterfall you mention?" "It is a symbol," the young man explained. "There are many waterfalls as in all countries where people like to go and picnic, play and swim. Forests where we can admire the great trees. But this waterfall, no one goes to. Not now. For us it must remain so. As a sort of myth. For it represents the transition from Source to Substance. From No Thing to Some Thing. In its flow and in its falling it is like a stream of unconsciousness. And there is healing there too. Long ago before we discovered how to heal in a holistic way, sick people were taken there to recover." "Is that why the boy is there?" George suggested. "Yes," agreed the young man. Only he seemed doubtful. "But his healing is already over and renewal has long since started. He is there from his own choice and perhaps because he answers to forces I have no comprehension of." Then he said, "The waterfall lies far in the interior. It will take some days to reach. We will go up river."

They set off at dawn in a big wooden boat, gracefully carved with a tall mast and arching lateen sails. The wind blowing inland filled the great wing of the sails and they sped forward with a surge that delighted George as he sat up in the bows watching the banks pass and the stream unfold. They did not moor up by night but kept going, the river illuminated by moonlight into a channel of bright silver between the dark forested hills. Overhead the night sky was ablaze with stars. George was no astronomer but at home he could usually recognise some familiar patterns and clusters but here they weren't visible. There were also some very bright stars circling around that if it was not so impossible could almost be described as moons. "Out of your orbit, George," he joked to him, just content to feel mildly bewitched as he gazed up. And if he had tried to figure out where exactly he was on the surface of the earth he would have failed. So he didn't try. He simply accepted where he was and looked forward to wherever they were going.

Finally they left the boat and the river and crossed over some forested hills before descending into a deep lush valley where long before they reached it they could hear the thunder of distant falls. Thunder is not quite the right word for thunder sounds threatening and this sound of the cascade was like the rush of a mighty wind passing through the treetops, the cheering of a great crowd welcoming a king returning victorious, a sound that elated George as he got closer and filled him with a profound sense of awe. Finally the track ended beside a thatched hut where an elderly man and his wife were preparing food. After they had eaten an extra portion was wrapped in leaf baskets to be carried further.

Only George and the young man proceeded to the waterfall itself. George glimpsed the white plume of the cascade through the overhanging trees and into a broad pool at its base. The back of the pool was shrouded in a rising mist and spray which blew across and cooled them while high above towered the majesty of the falls themselves and colossal tower of plunging foam. Then looking around George noticed a sandy beach where shaded between leafy trees a hammock was stretched and on it rocking his heels sat a boy, several years older than the child in the pavilion but nevertheless the same boy with the same watchful and penetrating look in his eyes as he regarded his visitors. The young man bowed, placed the food on the ground and retreated leaving George alone.

"Let's swim," shouted the boy. "Race you across and jumping up ran for the pool. With only a moment's hesitation George followed and made a headlong plunge into the pool. Surfacing he stared straight up into the cascade and it held him spellbound. Then at a cry of encouragement from the boy he forced his way through the water in pursuit. Ahead the boy was already climbing up onto a rock that was half hidden by falling spray. George was more than half way across when he saw a strange large grey animal take shape on the mist veiled rock. The boy shouted what sounded like "Hurrah" but could have been "Hurry", turned back to wave at George and then mounted the grey beast which emerging from the gloom into full view soared aloft.

Luckily George by then had reached the rock and was clinging on or otherwise he might have chocked from astonishment at seeing a great grey dragon with a boy on its back flying away over the trees. There was no doubting it as a dragon. He had seen enough pictures of dragons. There were the giant bat-like wings the clawed feet, even whips of smoke and fire hissing out from its crocodile mouth. George climbed onto the rock so recently vacated by the boy and his dragon friend. He sat down to get his breath back and found himself staring straight into his own reflection. Was it really him? For the image that faced him had a full head of hair and looked like George had looked in his graduate days. George reached back to touch his own hair and the reflection copied him. George was too bewildered by this and by the disappearance of the boy on the dragon to attempt an explanation. After a rest he swam back to the sandy beach hitched his wet clothes around him and started off down the track. When he reached the hut it was deserted. It appeared to have been deserted a long time for the thatch roof was collapsing.

George set off to follow where couple and the young man but he had little hope of catching them up. All day and all night he hurried on until at last he reached the river bank only to discover the boat had left without him. He sat there, downcast and hungry. After a while he saw a boat coming slowly down stream. It looked heavily laden for it was low in the water and its patched sail sagged. A burly man stood in stern steering. "Hey nipper," he called out. "Catch my line." And he threw out a mooring rope. George caught hold and made it fast to a stump. The man climbed down onto the bank glanced at his boat, looked down at George, scratched his head, chuckled and declared, "When's the last time you ate a square meal, young man?" Going back on board he produced a loaf of bread, a mug of ale and a wedge of cheese plus a couple of tomatoes. "The ale is for me," he boomed. "But the grub's all yours so tuck in."

As George gobbled it down scarcely pausing for breath the sailor commented. "There's more where that comes from but you'll have to join the crew and work your passage to get it. Unless you want to be left here." "No, no!" gasped George,

mouth full, "But where is the crew." "There wasn't one until you showed up," laughed the sailor. "Come on, look lively. We've got to get this cargo to town."

The cargo was earthenware pots of all shapes and sizes from huge amphora for storing water and oil and ale to small clay pots for cooking in and eating out of. It was all stored in straw which came in doubly handy as there was no accommodation as such, just a big tarpaulin. But the straw to spare to snuggle down in and try to sleep despite the sailor's snoring.

They travelled down the river for many days until they came to a town where the sailor bartered his cargo for stores and other cargo. There were several other similar boats moored up and in the evening the sailors all sat together chatting and joking and drinking. Except for George who was considered too young and nicknamed 'nipper'. George accepted this as he couldn't remember being any bigger. The reflection that nowadays faced him when he stood washing in the river was of a skinny kid about eight years old. And George had no memory of being anyone else, not even being George.

Then one evening before they were due to depart he felt something whizz by his head and looking up he found his view completely blocked by the huge and ominous shape of the dragon. Into sight came the boy who leaned over and let down his hand, shouting, "Hey skinny, grab hold."

George did just that and found himself being hauled aloft. He turned to look at the group of sailors but none of them seemed to have noticed anything unusual. Then he found himself seated in front of the boy, between the two great wings of the beast. "Hurrah!" shouted the boy, except it could well have been 'hurry', and the dragon turned in a half circle and soared away across the river leaving a plume of smoke in its wake. "Where shall we go?" called out the boy. "The waterfall," George suggested timidly. "Of course, of course. Good idea. Just the thing. Hurrah." And away they whirred over mountain and valley, river and lake until they dropped down right beside the cascade onto the very same mist shrouded rock. "Let's swim," cried the boy and dived into the pool. George followed and nearly caught him up before they reach the far side and breathlessly flung themselves down on the sand. Here they found a picnic laid out. Fresh bread still warm, pickles, cheese, honey, cool milk, lashings of clotted cream, sweep plump strawberries, slices of watermelon..... George ate and ate until the boy stopped him. "Time to go," he announced. "Where?" George queried but the boy was already swimming back to the dragon and George chased after him anxious not to be left behind. The boy was already on the dragon's back when he reached him but he let down a friendly hand and cried, "Heave up, skinny." Then with a loud "Hurrah" from them both, the dragon took off, soaring and circling higher and higher until they left the land far far below and entered the realms of the star bright vastness of space. George felt awed but the boy seemed to accept it quite naturally. He whispered in George's ear, "Dragon is looking for a tasty asteroid. You see he eats asteroids for lunch and just now he's very hungry." A great flaming belch from dragon seemed to confirm this and fortunately before long they came to a big rock tumbling through space which they landed on and which the dragon eagerly commenced eating. "I hope he doesn't eat it all," said George eyeing the ever smaller rock around him. "Else we'll fall off." "No we won't," said the boy grabbing George and depositing him safely between the dragon's wings. "And I think it's time we found a friendly planet. Somewhere we can eat too."

The dragon took off but slower, weighed down by a stomach full of asteroid which they could feel rumbling inside his furnace of a stomach while occasional blasts of hot ash snorted out of his nose. Finally after cruising around the galaxies they spied a greeny-blue planet that looked hopeful and landed in a meadow beside a stream where they found themselves pelted with fruits by what seemed to be monkeys. "Supper has arrived," announced the boy, munching the highly edible fruit. "Very welcome." But soon after something else arrived not welcome at all. Even the dragon appeared concerned when out of the trees came roaring and lumbering the hulks of huge and terrifying dinosaurs. The dragon blasted off a stream of flame to scorch them to a halt and then after the boys climbed on board and swiftly flew far out of harm's way.

They flew for a long time until they reached a whirling milky cluster of asteroids and stars. "Hurrah," cried the boy. "It's the milky way. The dragon will have lots of friends." And this was true for soon from every direction dozens and then hundreds of dragons were converging on them so that all together flew in a huge and formidable but fortunately friendly swarm of flapping wings and fire breathing snorts. Eventually the other dragons turned back for they were now getting towards the edge of the universe. A bright shining light played along the distant rim and as they approached it got so bright that even the dragon blinked and George had to shield his eyes entirely from the glare. When he next peeped out the dragon was wheeling down and came to a halt. They both dismounted to find a large shadow looming over them. "Welcome," it said softly. "Welcome." "Drat it," muttered the boy wearily. "Back to school."