

George and the Sand Castle

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(1)

George lived in New York City. He liked living in New York City, but if you asked him he couldn't tell you why. George had never lived anywhere else.

One afternoon in Summer George's Kind Aunt went with him to Riverside Park. He would rather have gone alone, but his mother had insisted. He often played in the park, except on Saturdays and Sundays of course. Then the park had too many people and bicycles and dogs. But today there were not many people in the park at all because it had rained in the morning. Even though he was really too old for it, George decided to play in the sandbox because the sand was still wet and sticky from the rain and could be used to build things.

George's Kind Aunt left him in the sandbox and sat on a bench nearby, knitting. There were two other children in the sandbox but both were smaller than George and they were at the other end and they were fighting. George ignored them.

George patted the sand and it stuck to his hands. He sat pushing sand with his foot. George decided to build a big castle out of sand, like one he saw on television.

After much work George was finished. The castle was large and sort square with a door, like a tunnel, in one side. It had four towers, one at each corner.

George began digging a ditch around the castle. Then he stopped. Suddenly something was wrong. Something. George sat down and thought. It was very quiet; it was completely quiet. Cars went by on Riverside Drive, but they made no sound. A dog barked at the edge of the sandbox, but no sound came out. George was frightened. His Kind Aunt still sat knitting on the bench. George shouted to her. She did not notice. She did not hear him. The two fighting children in the sand box with him did not even look. George was very frightened and very alone. He began to cry. The sun came out and shadows of leaves made funny shapes on the sand. Everything looked strange and shimmery through his tears. George closed his eyes tight.

(2)

"Who are you," shouted a voice from far off and high up. George opened his eyes and looked at the sand. In fact, it was all there was to look at. Sand stretched in front of him as far as he could see. On both sides of him there was nothing but sand.

"Who are you and what do you want?" shouted the voice again.

It came from behind George. He got up and turned around. A man stood high up on one tower of the highest castle George had ever seen (the only one he had ever really seen, in fact). "Who are you and what do you want?" the man shouted down. George forgot he was frightened. This was a real and exciting and strange castle with so much to be looked at and so much to be touched, and there were so many questions he wanted to ask about it.

George stared at the castle. He looked at it from top to bottom and from side to side until there was nothing more he could see. "Who are you and what do you want?" the man on the tower shouted again.

"I'm George," George said, "and I want to come in."

"Why," the man shouted.

"Because my parents named me George," George answered.

"I mean why do you want to come in," the man shouted down.

"Do you have horses and dungeons and big dining rooms with rugs on the wall and beautiful ladies and knights in armor inside?"

"Of course."

"Then I want to come in and see them."

"Are you a spy?"

George had seen spies on television so George knew he was not a spy. "No," he answered.

"Are you sure?"

George was sure.

"We can't take chances in times like these," the man said. He looked around sadly at the sand, then went on. "Still, you don't look much like a spy. Do you always tell the truth?"

George thought a minute. "Usually," George answered.

"Oh, well that settles it," the man said. "Spies seldom do. You may come in."

A huge door swung open in a tunnel-like doorway in the front of the castle. George walked in.

(3)

Inside was a boy the size of George's brother, dressed in brightly colored clothes. George knew from watching television that the boy was called a page, but George didn't call him that. He only said, "Hello."

"What do you want," the page said rudely, "I'm busy." To George he sounded very much like his brother.

"I want to see the inside of the castle, please." George said politely.

"Oh, all right. But you'll have to see it by yourself. We're all too busy to show you around." The page started to leave.

"Aren't you afraid I might be a spy?" George asked.

"Don't be silly," the page called back as he hurried out of the room, "if you were a spy the gatekeeper on the tower would never have let you in."

"Never?"

"He has never allowed a spy in," the page explained impatiently, "because if he had I would have found him and I have never found a spy. So he has never let a spy in. So you are not a spy. So he let you in." And he ran off.

George did not really understand this explanation, but there were so many interesting castle things around him that he did not think about it. Instead George set out to explore the castle.

It was exactly what a castle should have been.

(4)

When George finished looking through the castle he returned to the front door. He found an important-looking man waiting for him. He wore glasses and was nearly bald. He had a red face and was fat and wore a long red robe. George thought he might be the king.

"Are you the king?" George asked.

"I am the Good King," the Good King replied.

"You have a very nice castle," George said.

"Thank you."

George looked at the Good King and waited for him to say something. The Good King looked at George and waited for him to say something.

"The dungeon was a little dirty though."

"We don't use it very much," the Good King explained.

"Oh," said George. They again looked at each other in silence.

"Why is your castle in a desert?"

“It wasn’t always,” the Good King began with a touch of anger in his voice.

“You mean somebody moved the whole castle?” George butted in.

“No! I mean it wasn’t always a desert. You see, my brother. . .”

“Is your brother an Evil Magician,” George said quickly, “and does he live in an enchanted cave that nobody can get near and did he put a spell on your country?”

“Yes,” the King said with a startled look, “but how did you know? You’re not from my country. Are you a spy?” and he looked at George sternly.

“I’m not a spy,” George said firmly.

“No, of course not. If you were my page would have had you locked in the dungeon,” the Good King said proudly, “he’s very good at spotting spies.”

“Then do you cut off their heads,” George asked fiercely.

“No, we leave them in the dungeon forever,” the King answered.

“But the dungeon was empty,” George said in bewilderment.

“That’s because we’ve never caught any spies,” the King explained.

“Then why did you say your page is very good at spotting spies,” said George, who did not like the page very much.

“Oh, it’s not his fault. We’ve never caught any because we’ve never had any.”

“How do you know you’ve never had any?” George persisted.

“Because,” the Good King said patiently, “if we’d had any my page would have spotted them. I’ve already told you he’s very good at spotting spies. You’re trying to confuse me. How did you know all that about my brother?”

“It’s from a movie I saw on television once,” George said with a sigh.

“Television?” the King looked puzzled. “What is television?”

George had met people before who didn’t have a television, but he’d never met anybody who didn’t know what one was. His respect for the Good King went down. He tried to explain.

“It’s a thing that shows you cartoons and movies and funny shows and news and commercials, see.”

The Good King clearly did not see. George tried again.

“And it shows you satellite pictures of things on the other side of the world and pictures from the moon and everything.”

The King’s face brightened. “I see,” he said, “it’s what we call a crystal ball.”

“No,” George interrupted. “I’ve seen them on television and television is different.”

“Maybe,” the Good King said doubtfully. “You seem to enjoy your television thing while our crystal balls are terrible objects and are seldom used and then only by very brave people. But it sounds similar.”

“Do you have a crystal ball?” George asked excitedly.

“Yes,” said the King, “but I’ve never dared to use it.”

“Can I see it? I wouldn’t be afraid. Not even a little. Can I see it?”

The Good King only said “Hm,” but it was a very long and thoughtful hm.

(5)

After a long pause the Good King again spoke. “Well, now that you’ve seen the castle I suppose you’ll be wanting to leave.”

“Why no,” said George.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” the King said sadly, “because you’ve got to.”

“Why,” asked George in surprise.

“It’s the law.”

George did not understand.

“You see, the law says only citizens of this country can stay here and you aren’t a citizen of this country, so you’ve got to leave.”

“That’s a funny law,” said George.

“Is it really? Why?”

“But where can I go?” said George, ignoring the Good King’s question.

“I don’t know, but you’re not allowed to stay here.”

“But I don’t want to go,” George was beginning to cry. “I’m scared.” He was thinking of a movie he’d seen which showed a man lost in a desert.

“I don’t blame you for that,” said the Good King. “I’d be scared too if I had to go. But the law is very clear about it. You must go.”

“Do you want me to go?” George looked up at the Good King hopefully.

“No. Why should I?”

“But you’re the King. Can’t you let me stay?”

“Oh my, no. The law says you must go, and I must obey the law. It’s my most important duty as king. The law says so. Sometimes it can be very unpleasant to be a King.” The Good King sighed deeply as though wanting sympathy from George.

“Can’t you change the law?”

“What a silly idea,” the King exclaimed, “laws can’t be changed.”

“Can’t you make a new law?”

“Why laws aren’t made,” the King said with some surprise, “laws are.”

George was silent for a minute. “Then I’ve got to go?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Now?”

“Well, in a minute or two.”

But before anything else was done an old woman came into the room carrying a glass of something. “It’s time for your medicine,” she said to the King.

“Not now, mother, I’m extremely busy,” the Good King said.

The old woman looked hurt. She turned to George and said to him, “You see how he is? What can I do? You take your medicine, don’t you?”

George answered truthfully, “Well, not always.”

She turned back to the King. “Are you going to be like this, this spy here, or are you going to drink your medicine like a Good King?”

The King looked startled at this and stared thoughtfully at George while drinking his medicine. When he had finished his mother smiled at him and at George. “That’s better, isn’t it,” she said to George, “it’s been nice meeting you. Govern well, son,” she said to the King, and left.

“She says you’re a spy,” the King said to George sadly. “Drat, that means I’ll have to put you in the dungeon.”

“But you said I wasn’t a spy because your page is always right and he said I wasn’t a spy.”

“It’s true my page is always right, so you are not a spy, but my mother is sometimes right, so you might be, and the law says I must arrest any stranger who could be a spy.”

“Wait a minute,” George exclaimed, “if I’m in the dungeon I can’t leave.”

“No, of course not.” The Good King mused, “The law says I must put you in the dungeon if you are a stranger and might be a spy. It also says that you must leave if you are not a citizen.” The King paused. “Then the law must mean you become a citizen if I put you in the dungeon,” the King concluded.

“And are you going to put me in the dungeon,” George asked.

“Oh, we never really put our own citizens there. This is a good country and we trust our people.”

“But I can’t be a citizen unless you put me in the dungeon,” George persisted.

“True, but I can’t put you in the dungeon without putting a citizen in there, and I can’t do that.” Suddenly the King brightened. “Then by law

you must be a citizen now. Of course. The law is very clear. I just hadn't thought about it before."

"Does that mean I don't have to go then?" George asked hopefully.

"You couldn't if you wanted to," the Good King replied, "none of my people may go without my special permission."

George understood he could stay and that made him happy.

"You'll have to have a trial, though," the King said.

"Why?" George asked in surprise.

"To decide if you are a spy, of course."

"I thought you said I wasn't."

"There's no question, you're not. Still you might be, you know, so we must have a trial. It's the law."

George did not want to hear any more about the law so he was silent. But he was happy because he didn't have to go, though he worried a little about his trial. But not much. George curled up in a large chair and went to sleep.

(6)

"Wake up, hurry," George heard, and felt someone shaking him. He opened his eyes and saw, with little surprise, the page standing over him. "Come on, we haven't got all day. It's time for your trial. Follow me."

George wanted to object, but by the time he thought of what to say the page was gone. George went quietly out after him.

They came to the room where the trial was to be. It was a small room and held only a few people. The Good King sat at a table. George walked over to him. "Are you to be the Judge?" he asked.

"Of course," the King answered. "And, since we are trying to save money, I also present the case against you." George looked doubtful, but the King went on. "That may seem unfair, possibly, but since you have no lawyer, I'll also defend you, so you see it all evens out." The King looked satisfied, so George said nothing.

The King continued. "Over here," he gestured toward a table at which sat two men, one quite old, and one quite young, "over here is the jury."

George had seen trials on television and he thought maybe the jury should be larger. "Shouldn't there be more of them?" he asked.

"We're a very small country," the King explained, "so two is all our juries will hold. Besides, two are quite enough to decide whether or not you are a

spy. That man,” he pointed at the older of the two, “he decides if you are a spy, while the other one,” he pointed at the younger, “he decides if you aren’t.”

“Do they ever disagree?” George asked curiously.

“Constantly,” the Good King answered, “they’re father and son.”

“Then what if. . .”

“Let the trial begin,” the page called out, and George got no further. Fortunately, George had seen trials on television and had some idea what to do.

“I object,” he shouted.

Everyone looked startled. “To what do you object?” the King asked.

George thought for a minute. “To the trial, I guess.”

“Don’t do that,” the King said, “it’s being held in your honor.”

“I’m sorry,” George apologized. He sat down and the trial began. The Good King stood up and walked around to the front of the table. “I will begin by presenting the evidence against this young man. As is well known, the accused is a stranger to our country. He has not explained how he got here. This is very suspicious. My mother who, as we all know, is sometimes right, has said he is a spy, so on that basis alone he might be a spy. I can only ask you to conclude that he is a spy.” Here he looked significantly at the older juror. Then he sat down.

“Very good case I’ve made out against you, don’t you think,” he whispered to George, who said nothing. “Don’t worry though. I have an excellent defense ready. You see, I knew what I was going to say against you long before I heard me say it.” He winked knowingly at George who only looked confused. The Good King looked hurt and stood up again.

“I will now present the evidence for the young man. It is true, as you have recently heard, that he is a stranger to our country, but on the other hand, he is also a citizen; the King himself decided so. It is also true that he has not explained how he got here, but then, no one has asked him. Finally, my mother who, as we all know, is sometimes wrong, has said he was a spy, so he might not be. Therefore I must ask you to conclude he is not a spy.” Here he looked at the younger juror. Then he sat down again.

George whispered in his ear, “Shouldn’t you tell them about what your page said?”

The King jumped up. “Oh yes, I almost forgot. My page, who is always right about such things, said he was not a spy.” He leaned over George and whispered quickly, “Thank you.” Then he walked back to the other side of

the table and became the judge again. "As there are no more arguments to be heard," he said to the jury, "what is your verdict?" He looked at the old man. "Is he guilty?"

"No."

He looked at the young man. "Is he innocent?"

"Yes."

"That settles it, then. George, you are officially not a spy. I don't suppose you'll want to appeal the verdict, will you?"

"No, thank you," said George.

And the trial was over.

(7)

"It's getting late," said the Good King, "I don't know where you're going to sleep; it's a very small castle." The King looked more worried than usual. "I'll take you to my mother. She can find some place for you, I'm sure."

"Thank you," said George doubtfully, as he followed the King.

They came to a little room in one wing of the castle. In it was the King's mother. "Mother," said the Good King, "this is George."

"Oh yes," she said, "we met downstairs." She smiled at him. "Didn't my son say you were a spy or something?"

"He isn't a spy," the King said abruptly.

"I'm so glad," the old woman said. "My son puts spies into the dungeon, you know. He's a very stern King, but good to his people," she said proudly.

"Can you find a bed for him tonight?" the King interrupted. "I would, myself, but I'm busy with affairs of the kingdom just now."

"Why, of course." The old lady smiled at George and at the King, who left quickly. "He means he's thinking about the sand," she said. "Come in, George. Sit down. Have some cookies." She gave him some. "I'll make up a bed for you while you eat those. Then you can tell me all about yourself."

When the King's mother returned George had finished the cookies. Before she could ask George about himself he asked wistfully, "The King is a good King, isn't he?"

"He is the Good King," she said proudly.

George thought about the answer for a time. "Where is the King's brother?" George asked suddenly.

"In a cave not far from here," the old woman answered.

"Why does he live in a cave?" he asked eagerly.

“He says it’s because he’s an Evil Magician and they often live in caves,” she explained.

“Don’t you mind that he’s an Evil Magician?” Then he stopped because he thought he might have hurt her. She smiled sadly.

“He’s my son. I mind. But it doesn’t really matter to me.”

“Do you ever see him?”

“Oh yes, I go sometimes to visit him weekends. His cave is very near here.”

“Did he really make the country a desert?”

“Yes.”

“And he makes all the people suffer?”

“He says he does, but he doesn’t really. It’s a small country, a very small country, and except for him, all the people live here in this castle, and always have. I don’t understand why he left. But anyway, before, when it wasn’t a desert, we only had room for one tree. Still it was very wicked of him to make the country a desert. All the efforts of the country now are devoted to getting our grass and our tree back.”

“Why did he do it?”

“I don’t know. I think he liked the idea of being an Evil Magician, so he did what he thought an Evil Magician would do so that he could be one.”

“That’s silly,” George cried, without thinking. The old woman only nodded. “He must be very unhappy,” he went on quickly.

“He says he’s happy.” She shook her head sadly.

“Because he wanted to be a wicked magician, and now he is one?” George wondered out loud.

“Maybe,” was all the old woman said. She was silent for a time. “Maybe,” she said again. “Now, you’ve finished your cookies and it’s time for bed.”

(8)

In the morning the King came to see George. “George,” he stopped and looked embarrassed, “George, I’ve got a task for you today. I want you to look into my crystal ball.”

“Oh boy,” George said.

The King ignored the remark and went on, “It could be difficult and dangerous. No one has dared to look into it since my father did, many years ago But you said you would not be frightened.” George began to look doubtful.

The Good King continued, "There are legends from ancient times of horrible and terrifying things people have seen in it."

George interrupted. "Maybe I am scared a little. Why do you want me to look at it?"

"The ball often has given useful advice. I need something to help me against the Evil Magician, my brother."

"Can't somebody else do it?"

"Everyone else is far too frightened. But I know you won't fail because you said you wouldn't be afraid. You see, the ball is only dangerous if you are afraid. If you're not afraid, there's nothing to fear. But," and here he looked harshly at George, "but," he said again and glared at George, "but," he said once more, and glowered at George, "if you are the least bit afraid, it will be very dangerous. Now come on."

George looked at the King's mother. "Do I have to go, really?" he asked her. He was afraid. And because of what the King had said, he became more and more afraid.

The old woman smiled at him. "Yes, you must go. He is the King, after all," and she looked at him proudly. "But," and she leaned down and whispered in his ear, "it's not as bad as he says. You can be afraid if you like. It won't hurt. Don't mind what the King says. He says it is so bad because he is very afraid himself." He smiled a little at her through some tears that had begun to trickle down from his eyes.

"Come," said the Good King. And they left.

They walked for some time through empty halls. Finally they came to a closed door, with a small crowd of people standing around it. They all stared at George.

"Is everybody we need here?" asked the King. He looked around at the people. "Nurse, doctor, lawyer, huntsman, lion tamer," George wanted to cry again, but they were all looking at him so, that he felt too embarrassed to cry. "Chaplain," cried the King, "Where is my chaplain?"

"There isn't any," someone said.

"Why not?" the Good King demanded.

The lawyer explained. "According to law, a chaplain may not marry. If he marries he is no longer chaplain, and all his official acts are void."

"Yes, yes," said the King impatiently.

"The chaplain forgot, and was married this morning."

"Who dared to conduct the ceremony?" the Good King asked furiously.

"He did it himself."

The King brightened. “But then, if he is married now, the ceremony is not valid since it was conducted by a chaplain who married. So he isn’t married after all.”

“True,” the lawyer replied, “but if he isn’t married now, then the ceremony he conducted was valid, so he must be married.”

The King looked puzzled. “I haven’t time now to interpret the law on this. Bring the man here, we may need him. I’ll decide later if he is still really chaplain.”

This was done.

“Now, George,” the Good King said, “you must go in and look at the crystal ball.”

“Aren’t you coming with me?”

“Ah, no, not really, I must see about this chaplain problem. You understand. But I’ll be here when you come out, of course.”

George nodded slowly. He looked at the other people around the door, who just smiled at him. He took a deep breath, and opened the door.

The room was empty except for a small table in the middle with a glass ball on it. George entered the room. Someone pulled the door shut behind him. He stood where he was for some time. Finally, he could stand still no longer. He went toward the ball, but slowly, because he kept looking around him and behind him in case anything was there. But nothing was.

The shiny ball lay on a black cushion. George stood close to it and stared at it. Nothing happened. He became a little more brave. He leaned his elbows on the table and looked closely into the ball. Still he saw nothing. He became still more brave. He walked around the table and looked at the ball from all sides and all angles. He saw nothing. He even picked it up and looked at it from below. Finally he decided it was just a piece of pretty glass, and that there was nothing he could see in it. He felt a little disappointed, but very happy, and he ran laughing out of the room.

When the door of the room burst open the little crowd around it drew quickly back. George came running out laughing, saw them all looking frightened, and stopped.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“What did you see,” the King asked. He had a notebook ready to write down what George said.

“Nothing,” George told him.

“Nothing!” said the shocked King.

“Nothing,” George said again. “It’s just an ordinary piece of glass.”

The crowd looked terrified when he said this. The Good King said, “let me think.”

And he thought.

“Could it be,” he wondered out loud, “could it be that you are one of those rare people that such evil magic can’t affect? Yes, it must be. This is the proof. You’re sure you saw absolutely nothing?”

George was sure.

“This is wonderful.” The King turned to the crowd. “At last,” he continued, “we have someone whom evil magic can not harm. We have someone we can send to my brother. We have someone he can’t put a spell on.”

The crowd cheered. George did not really understand, but the Good King hurried him off before he could think about it.

That evening George asked the King’s mother, “Why didn’t I see anything?”

The old woman’s face crinkled up in laughter. “There never was anything to be seen,” she said.

“But other people saw things, didn’t they?” he persisted.

“You are the first person who admitted he saw nothing. Even my husband, many years ago, said he had seen strange things, but he told me when were were alone that he had seen nothing.”

“Why do people say they have seen things,” George asked in puzzlement.

“Why did you say you didn’t see anything,” the old lady asked.

“Because I didn’t,” George replied. “But,” he began again.

“Don’t think about it now. It’s time for bed.”

(9)

The next morning the Good King again came for George.

“George,” he said, “I’ve got a very important mission for you.” And without pausing for a reply he went on. “I want you to go to the Evil Magician, my brother, and give him a message. Tell him to give us back our tree and our grass. Tell him I order him to be truly sorry for what he has done. And tell him I, his loving brother and his Good King, forgive him (if he obeys me, of course). Can you remember that?”

“I think so,” said George.

“Good. Then you’ll leave at once.”

“Not until I’ve made him some sandwiches to take along,” the King’s mother interrupted.

The King said nothing. While they were waiting George asked the King, “Why do I have to go? Why can’t someone else go?”

“You’re the only one I can send, George,” the King explained, “because you’re the only one here who can’t be hurt by his magic. You proved that yesterday.”

George thought about what the King’s mother had told him, but he didn’t mention it. He didn’t really know why not.

Finally the sandwiches were ready, and George had no reason not to go.

“My page will show you the way,” and the Good King was gone.

Almost at once the page appeared. “Come on,” he said. George said good-bye to the old woman, who said good-bye, but made no attempt to kiss him, for which he was grateful. Then George and the page started through the corridors of the palace to the front door.

“Are you really going to see the Evil Magician?” the page asked with a trace of envy in his voice.

“Yes.”

“And it’s true that his magic can’t hurt you?”

“I guess so,” George replied, though he really didn’t believe what he said.

“Wow, that’s great. I wish I could go instead of you. I wouldn’t be at all afraid. I’d love to see his cave. There are lots of stories about it.”

George had an idea. “Would you go instead of me?”

“Oh, wow,” the page looked excited. Then he frowned. “But I can’t. You’re the only one his magic can’t hurt.”

“Oh,” George said sadly.

They had reached the front door of the castle. The page pointed to a little hill not far away and said the cave was in there. George went out of the castle, carrying his paper bag of sandwiches. The page looked at him enviously.

“Wow,” he said. And shut the door. George was alone. He stood still for a moment. Then he started toward the hill. Slowly.

“Good-bye. Good luck,” a voice called from behind him and far up. He turned around and saw, high up on a tower of the castle the gatekeeper was waving to him.

“Good-bye. Thank you,” George called back, and waved. The castle somehow looked smaller and more friendly than when George had first seen it. But the door remained closed. George sighed and turned away from it. He began again to walk toward the hill, and as he walked he ate a sandwich without even noticing.

The desert ended shortly before the hill began and there was tall grass all around the entrance to the cave. George gripped his paper bag of sandwiches tightly, walked through the grass, and stuck his head in the open door. He could hear music from somewhere deep inside the cave. George tried to call "hello," but no sound came out. He called again, trying to be a little louder and this time he was so loud he scared himself. The music stopped and in a few moments a man appeared. He looked a little like the King, but both older and younger somehow. His hair was long and grey and he had a grey beard, but his eyes were young, and he wore a suit like George had seen a Mississippi gambler on television wear. He didn't really look evil.

"Are you the Evil Magician?" George asked.

"I am," the Evil Magician answered.

"I have a message from the Good King," George said, and he gave the message. The Evil Magician listened. Then he said, "You must be George. Mother wrote me about you. Won't you sit down, and tell me all about yourself. You might begin by telling me why you carry money in your ears," and he took a quarter out of George's left ear and put it in his vest pocket.

George opened his mouth in surprise, then he giggled nervously. "I don't carry money in my ears," he insisted.

"No? Then how do you explain this?" and he took another quarter from George's right ear. "Now I suppose your head is empty?" George giggled again.

"Now tell me about yourself, really."

And George did. He told the Evil Magician all about New York, and the sandbox, and the castle, and the trial, and the crystal ball. Except for the King's mother, a little, no one at the castle had listened to him, so now he talked and talked. He finished with the King's message again.

"Hm, yes. But that can wait," the Magician said. "I'm hungry, how about you? Yes, how about you? I think I'll eat you up." He started toward George who, for some reason, was not afraid, but only laughed and laughed. The Magician smiled. "What's in the bag? Sandwiches. Wonderful. Let's eat."

Soon they finished all the sandwiches and sat eating animal crackers and talking about New York and monsters and stars and magic and many other strange things.

Finally the animal crackers too were finished. George thought he should remind the Evil Magician of the Good King's message. He did so.

"Not now," the Evil Magician said. "Later. We have lots of time yet. Would you like to see my torture devices?"

George jumped up excitedly. "Really," he asked.

"Well, no, they're only plans. I've never built any of them."

"But, can I see them?"

"If you want to."

"Oh, boy, yes."

The Evil Magician went away, and came back shortly with a box full of papers. He and George spent the rest of the afternoon looking at them. They were the most delightfully fiendish things George had ever seen. One plan showed a man tied up at the foot of a mountain. There were lots of loose rocks on the mountain and any loud noise would start an avalanche and bury the man. The ropes holding him were not tight, but were covered with sneezing powder. George thought that one very nice. Another plan which George liked even better showed a man locked in a cage with a man-eating wolf. At certain times a machine gave a package of food to the man. If he ate the food the wolf would get hungry and eat him up. If he gave the food to the wolf he would starve to death. And there wasn't enough food for both.

George and the Magician spent hours looking at these plans. They even made up a new one with a monster that hugged to death people it liked and ate up people it didn't like; someone was locked up with it and had to keep the monster from either liking him or hating him. It was OK, but George thought the plans of the Magician were better. But he said he'd had years to work on them, which explained it.

Finally, when George had seen all the torture plans, he thought he should remind the Evil Magician again of the Good King's message.

"But," the Magician began, "it's too late today to do anything. Tomorrow I'll work on it."

George was disappointed. He had hoped to see the Evil Magician make the sand vanish, or else punish the King, or something. He was ready for this and he didn't want to wait until tomorrow. However, there was nothing he could do. He got up.

"Can I come back tomorrow?" he asked hopefully.

“I don’t know,” the Magician answered, “you haven’t been here tomorrow yet.”

George looked confused.

“It’s getting late. Would you like to stay here tonight?”

“Can I? Yes.”

The Magician smiled, and absent-mindedly took a quarter out of his own ear.

“Are you really an evil Evil Magician?” George asked suddenly.

“Very evil,” the Evil Magician answered.

“I don’t believe it,” George said stubbornly, “prove it.”

“Um. Well. I kept the quarters I found in your ears, didn’t I?”

George had to say yes. He wanted more in the way of proof, but he was very tired, too tired to ask again.

(12)

The next morning the Evil Magician did not appear for a long time. George could hear music from somewhere deeper in the cave but he thought it polite not to investigate. Instead he went outside and took his shoes and socks off and ran around in the tall grass. Finally he began to get very hungry and he came inside to look for some cookies. Just then the Evil Magician appeared.

“Hello,” George said.

“Hi, George.”

“Do you have any cookies?”

“Haven’t you had breakfast yet?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have waited for me.” The Magician made breakfast. It was good but George was disappointed he made it just like his mother. He wanted to see it done by magic. After breakfast George and the Evil Magician sat at the table and talked.

“Don’t you get lonely here, all alone?” George asked.

“No.”

“Are you really happy here?”

“Yes. Aren’t you?”

The question surprised George. He hadn’t thought about it. “I guess so,” he answered hesitantly.

“But you’re not sure.”

“I don’t know. I guess so. Yes. But I shouldn’t be, should I?” he said doubtfully.

“Why not, for goodness sake?”

“Um. Well, you’re an Evil Magician and this is your cave and I shouldn’t be happy here, should I?”

“Then you’re happy, but you think you shouldn’t be?”

“I guess so.”

“Were you happy at the castle?”

“I think so. I was supposed to be, wasn’t I?”

“But were you?”

“It was a little silly sometimes.”

“I’m not silly, I suppose,” the Magician said in pretended anger.

“You say silly things sometimes, but you’re not silly.”

“Um.”

The conversation moved to other things. George and the Magician spent a long time trying to invent a way to close garbage cans so that raccoons couldn’t open them, but garbage men could. (Working on the assumption, as the Magician pointed out, that the garbage man was not a raccoon).

“Why do you live here in this cave instead of at the castle?” George asked suddenly. “Couldn’t you be an Evil Magician there?”

“I was, for a long time,” the Evil Magician answered, “but it’s too crowded and busy there. Everyone lives in the castle, you know. For years I used to come here to look at this pretty hill and finally I decided to live here.”

“But you can’t see the hill if you’re in this cave,” George said.

“I can see the inside of it.”

“Yes,” George said doubtfully, “but don’t you want to see the outside too?”

“I don’t really have to see it all the time, as long as I know it’s there.”

“Couldn’t you know it at the castle?” George persisted.

“It’s easier to know it here, somehow,” the Evil Magician explained.

George wasn’t sure about this. Instead of continuing he reminded the Magician again of the King’s message.

“It’s almost lunch time,” the Magician began. “I’ll see to it after that. Now, I’ve got some things to do. I’ll see you at noon.” And the Evil Magician left abruptly. George was alone and puzzled. Soon music again came from deep in the cave. George listened for a while, then he went outside to play until lunch.

(13)

After a lunch of salami and cookies George had still more questions.

“Are you ever really going to make the desert disappear?”

“Yes,” the Magician answered firmly.

“Soon?” George asked hopefully. He wanted to see it happen.

“I suppose so.”

“That will make your brother and all the people happy.”

“Will it?”

George thought. “Won’t it?” he asked. The Magician did not answer.

“Do you know why I did it?” he said finally.

“So you could be an Evil Magician,” George answered happily.

The Magician looked surprised. “Who told you that,” he asked.

“Your mother.”

The Magician was silent for a long time. “When I was younger,” he began finally, “I thought people didn’t pay any attention to the grass around them or to the tree. They were beautiful and it was wrong not to see it. I wanted to make people love these things and I thought if I hid them for a while people would realize how much they lost.”

“And you could do it because you were an Evil Magician?” George asked eagerly.

The Magician ignored the question. “It was very wrong of me to try and force other people to like what I liked.”

“Shouldn’t they like trees and grass,” said George, missing the point.

“I think it’s better for them if they do, probably. But you can’t force someone to like something. And it’s wrong to try.”

“It is?” said George, thinking of his Aunt.

“It is.”

“But did it work?” George asked anyway.

“No. Most people just got used to living in a desert. All that really happened was that everybody hated me.”

“Gee,” George said sympathetically. “Why didn’t you change it back from a desert then?”

“I always meant to, but I kept putting it off. I don’t know why.”

“Was it very hard to do?”

“Oh no. I had the tree transplanted to the other side of the hill, and I rented the sand.”

George looked amazed and disappointed. “Then you didn’t do it by magic?” he asked.

“No.”

“Are you really a magician?”

“Oh yes. But you see, the only reason I can be a magician is that I don’t try to use magic.”

George was confused. “And aren’t you even really evil?” He was on the verge of tears.

“I am an Evil Magician,” he said proudly. “I don’t have to do evil to be an Evil Magician. I only have to be an Evil Magician to be an Evil Magician.”

“Then isn’t the Good King good either?” he asked.

“The Good King is the Good King because he is the Good King.”

George decided to change the subject. “Will you make the desert go away soon?” he asked.

The Magician hesitated. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“When? This afternoon? Will you?”

“Yes. This afternoon,” the Magician decided suddenly.

“Oh boy,” George yelled.

That afternoon the Evil Magician made some telephone calls and after dark trucks came and took the sand away. And a large crane came and moved the tree from behind the hill and put it where it used to be, halfway between the hill and the castle. In the morning the Evil Magician and George went to the top of the hill and looked at things. There were traces of grass which the sand had not killed. Soon things would be green and fresh again. Near the castle George could see someone putting gasoline in a lawnmower. The Magician saw this too. He sighed.

“I wish there was some way I could get them to see that it’s better if they don’t. . .” he stopped suddenly. He looked at George and smiled. “Come on,” he said. “It’s time for breakfast. Let’s go inside now.” They went down the hill through the tall grass and into the cave.

(14)

After the restoration of the country George stayed with the Evil Magician for several weeks. Grass now was growing where the desert had been and some wildflowers were beginning to spread away from the hill. Every morning George would hear music from deep in the cave, for a long time. Then the Magician would appear and they would have breakfast. Every afternoon

George played on the hill or under the tree or read some of the Magician's many books about dinosaurs or stars or something. Or sometimes he swam in the little river that ran in back of the hill. Or sometimes he just lay in the warm sun and did nothing at all. Every evening George and the Evil Magician talked about all kinds of interesting things. Sometimes George understood and sometimes he didn't.

Finally, one morning at breakfast George said, "I think I should go back to the castle now."

"You can stay here as long as you like, you know."

"Thank you," George said, "but I really should go back and tell the King what happened. Is it OK if I go after lunch?"

"Of course. It's been very nice having you here." George looked pleased because he knew the Magician meant it. That day, after lunch, he said good-bye to the Evil Magician and set out for the castle. He was very happy the country was green again.

(15)

Late in the afternoon George came to the castle. He found the gatekeeper outside with a lawnmower. "Hello," said George.

"Oh, hello," said the gatekeeper impatiently.

"Isn't it nice now that the desert is gone and everything is green again?" said George happily.

"I suppose so," the gatekeeper said. "I haven't had time to enjoy it yet. I've been so busy mowing lawns. They look ragged if you don't keep after them. But I no sooner finish cutting on one side of the castle than the other side looks too long. I'll be glad when Fall comes and I can relax. After I rake the leaves from under the tree, of course." And he hurried off with the mower.

George stared after him for a moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders and went inside. There he met the page.

"Hello," said George.

"Wow, you came back. What's the Evil Magician like? Is he really powerful and mysterious and evil and ugly?" the page asked, bouncing on one foot in his excitement.

"Oh, no," George said, somewhat shocked. "He's nice, and not evil at all, and he makes music, and he doesn't really do magic."

The page looked at George in disbelief and disgust. Finally he said scornfully, "He must have enchanted you after all. The Good King never should have sent you. You're too little." And he walked off.

George had expected something like this from the page. He went on, looking for the Good King. He found him seated on his throne. "Hello," said George. "The desert is gone."

"Of course it is," the King replied. "Is he sorry for what he did?"

"Oh yes," George told him, "in fact he's been sorry for a long time."

"What!" The King was in a rage. "I wanted him to be sorry because I wanted him to be sorry, not because he wanted to be sorry."

George started to say he was sorry, but he stopped just in time. The King was too angry to say any more, so George left.

He found the King's mother in her room. "Hello," said George.

She smiled at him. "Is he coming back home to the castle now?" she asked.

"I don't think so. He's happy in his cave," George told her.

She stared at him for a minute. "No. You don't understand," she said. Then she was silent and stared at the wall in front of her. When George realized she wasn't going to say any more he left quietly.

George walked up the stairs to one of the towers. From the top he saw green grass all around the castle, carefully trimmed. Not far away was the tree, large and full of leaves. Beyond that was the hill of the Evil Magician, covered with tall grass and wild flowers. No one was in sight except the gatekeeper carrying a can of gasoline to the lawnmower far from the castle. George wanted to cry.

Slowly he went down from the tower and out the front door. It was very late in the afternoon now and the tree cast a long shadow on the ground. He went to it and lay on his back. He looked up at the leaves. In the distance he heard the gatekeeper start the lawnmower. He shut his eyes. He heard the lawnmower come closer and get louder and louder. It blew its horn. Horn! George opened his eyes in surprise. The big tree still spread over him but children were running past and the afternoon traffic jam on Riverside Drive seemed louder than ever before.

"George, don't get sand in your hair," his Aunt yelled to him. He sat up and brushed the sand off. "I'm sorry," he told her.

She sniffed angrily.

"I won't do it again."

She sniffed again. "I've been telling you for the longest time. Didn't you even hear me?" She went on without waiting for an answer. "Why are you such a Bad Boy, George?"

George wanted to tell her he was a Bad Boy because he was a Bad Boy and it didn't mean he was bad. But she went on.

"It's not nice to be a Bad Boy, George. I want you to be sorry."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes, you say it, but you don't mean it. How can you be such a Bad Boy?"

George thought it better if he didn't say anything. So he and his Kind Aunt went home for supper.