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Once when I was six years old I saw a magnificent picture in a book called *True Stories of the Virgin Forest*. It showed a boa constrictor swallowing a wild beast. Here is a copy of the drawing.



In the book it said: 'Boa constrictors swallow their prey whole, without chewing. Afterwards they are unable to move, and they digest by going to sleep for six months.'

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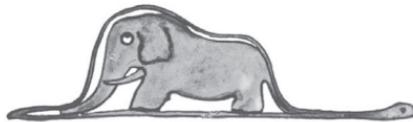
This made me think a lot about the adventures of the jungle and, eventually, I succeeded with a coloured pencil in making my first drawing. My Drawing Number One. It looked like this:



I showed my masterpiece to the grown-ups, and asked if my drawing frightened them.

‘Why would a hat frighten anyone?’ they answered.

My drawing was not of a hat. It was of a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. So then I drew the inside of the boa constrictor, for the benefit of the grown-ups. (Grown-ups always need explanations.) My Drawing Number Two looked like this:



The grown-ups now advised me to give up drawing boa constrictors altogether, from the inside or the outside, and devote myself instead to geography,

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history, arithmetic and grammar. So it was that, at the age of six, I gave up a wonderful career as a painter. I had been discouraged by the failure of my Drawing Number One and my Drawing Number Two. Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is exhausting for children always and forever to be giving explanations.

I had to choose a different career, then, so I learned how to fly aeroplanes. I have flown all over the world. And geography, I will admit, has served me very well. At a glance I can distinguish China from Arizona. Which is very useful if you get lost in the night.

In the course of my life I have therefore had many dealings with many important people. I have lived a great deal among grown-ups. I have observed them from close up. This has not greatly improved my opinion of them.

Whenever I came across one who seemed to me at all clear-headed, I would try showing my Drawing Number One, which I always kept by me. I wanted to find out if this was somebody with real understanding. But the answer would always be: 'That is a hat.' In which case I would not talk to that

person about boa constrictors, or virgin forests, or stars. I would place myself on their level. I would talk about bridge and golf, about politics and neckties. And the grown-up would be very pleased to have made the acquaintance of such a sensible fellow.



So I kept my own company, without anyone whom I could really talk to, until six years ago, when I made a forced landing in the Sahara Desert. Something had broken in my engine. And as I had neither mechanic nor passengers with me, I braced myself to attempt a difficult repair job all alone. It was a matter of life or death: I had barely enough drinking water to last a week.

On the first night, then, I went to sleep on the sand a thousand miles from all human habitation. I was more isolated than a shipwrecked man on a raft in mid-ocean. So imagine my surprise to be woken at daybreak by a funny little voice saying:

‘If you please – draw me a sheep!’

‘What!’

‘Draw me a sheep . . .’

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I leaped to my feet, completely thunderstruck. I rubbed my eyes slowly. I looked around slowly. And then I saw a most extraordinary little fellow, who stood there solemnly watching me. Here is the best likeness that, later on, I was able to make of him. The drawing is certainly far less delightful than the original. But that is not my fault. I had been discouraged by the grown-ups in my career as a painter, when I was six years old, and had never learned to draw anything – except the insides of boas and the outsides of boas.

Now I was staring at this apparition before me, my eyes popping out of my head. Remember, I was a thousand miles from all human habitation. Yet this little fellow seemed neither to have lost his way, nor to be dying of exhaustion, or hunger, or thirst, or fright. Nothing about him suggested a child astray in the middle of the desert, a thousand miles from all human habitation. When I finally found my voice, I said:

‘But – but what are you doing here?’

To which he merely repeated, very slowly, as though it were a matter of great consequence:

‘If you please – draw me a sheep . . .’

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Here is the best likeness that, later on, I was able to make of him.

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