

## "Toad"

Tom E. Willey

“**T**OADIE throw baby up light. Baby go ocean, get all wet.” This succinct bit of dialogue describes the first tragedy in the life of Toad. Toad, recognized by the Bureau of Vital Statistics as Thomas Andrew, is my two-year-old son. The pseudonym was inspired by a character of the same name in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Grahame's Mr. Toad and our Toad share a wildness for all types of mechanized gadgets, especially vehicles.

The only object of Toad's adoration that is not comprised of nuts, bolts, and springs is his “baby.” This protagonist of the ocean drama was a dingy, affectionately abused teddy bear. During our return voyage from Europe, Toad was entertaining himself by tossing baby up to the ceiling light in the cabin. An extra-zealous effort sent baby over Toad's head and out of the open porthole. “Daddy, quick, get—get Toadie's Baby!” I thrust my head through the porthole in time to see the stuffed animal pitch on the crest of the ship's wake and disappear into the gray Atlantic swell. From that moment forward, Toad could speak of nothing but the untimely demise of his companion. His opening address to grandparents, aunts, uncles, and new acquaintances was always baby's eulogy. I could not help but feel a twinge of guilt as he went through this routine, even though rescue efforts on my part would have cost Toad a daddy as well as a teddy. Great-grandfather was audience to this story, and a few days later baby returned in true Homeric fashion to be received like a lost Ulysses. The new baby, unlike his predecessor, was a clean and soft white. Toad warmly and completely accepted him. All comers are now greeted with “Toadie's baby come back fum ocean. Get all white. Toadie's baby back!”

Pull-toys and shiny trucks stand practically untouched in my son's room; however, my tool box is usually found in the middle of the living room floor devoid of hammer, screwdriver, wrenches, and ruler. Toad utilizes these implements to keep tricycle, television, and all door knobs in a state of excellent repair. Since the day of his first awareness, he has watched his daddy puttering about in various decrepit apartments, endeavoring to lock out the elements of nature. Evidently my comical exploits as a handyman have whetted his mechanical curiosity. The manual dexterity displayed by the lad has given me cause for apprehension. By his tenth birthday he will probably be more adept with tools than I. In the process of moving, I had disassembled some of his toys. A few weeks ago I was engrossed in the process of putting them back together, and was becoming very provoked by his kibitzing. During a struggle with the complexities of his wagon he officiously relieved me of the screwdriver. In exasperation I said, “Okay, young Edison, put it

together yourself." Toad promptly put a bolt through the wagon bed, ran it through the axle yoke, and gently seated the nut. He then in a matter-of-fact tone requested me to hold the bolt while he tightened the nut. A few minutes later the wagon was loaded with blocks and was being towed to the construction site of a tower.

Toad's subtlety in manipulating the emotions of Mother and Dad is the most vexing but most amusing facet of his nature. The epitome of Victorian fatherhood, I will burst into his room when I hear him playing after bedtime. With a sprint and a dive he is across the room, into bed, and under the covers. Assuming a benign little grin, the combination cherub-leprechaun will say, "Toadie love Daddy. Daddy sing Toadie song, please." Exit the stern, paternal countenance and on stage is the crooner of Irish lullabies. After a chorus of "Too-ra-loo-ra," tiny man is off to the land of "Winken, Blinken, and Nod," and Daddy emerges from the nursery aglow over his efficiency as inducer of dreams.

To remove from myself the stigma of being a typical doting father, I must add that Toad runs the gamut of two-year-old habits. Occasional tantrums and wet drawers remind me that he is experiencing the normalcy of his age. They are a healthy indication that my son is not different from any other child of his age. Speaking in absolute objectivity, if that is possible for me as his father, I feel that his inquisitiveness and comprehension are unique qualities for a child of two. His zest and interest in the world around him are like an elixir to my spirits when they are low. That small, Celtic face, crowned with golden brown fur the length and texture of puppy fur, is invariably waiting for me, peering out of the doorway each evening. "Comon, Daddy! Eat supper, tatoes, carrots, beans!" He says all this in a breathless manner, as if getting me to the table is a very grave responsibility. Twenty-seven pounds of vitality, distributed over a wiry two-foot, nine-inch frame, lead me into the kitchen. These dimensions do not connote a child of corpulence or of excessive leanness. He bears resemblance to those robust little gnomes in *Snow White*. A bulldog standing on its hind paws would cast a silhouette similar to Toad's—barrel chest tapering to slender hips; however, the round remnant of his babyhood pot-belly is quite visible, especially after his voracious appetite has been fulfilled.

In conclusion, I must admit that there is one point which disturbs me. I have discussed this "son" business with many other fathers, and from what they tell me—they all have geniuses too!