

Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame

Abridged in 10 episodes

8: THE FURTHER ADVENTURES OF TOAD

The front door of the hollow tree faced eastwards, so Toad was called at an early hour; partly by the bright sunlight streaming in on him, partly by the exceeding coldness of his toes.

Sitting up, he rubbed his eyes first and his complaining toes next, wondered for a moment where he was, then, with a leap of the heart, remembered everything - his escape, his flight, his pursuit; remembered, first and best thing of all, that he was free!

Free! He shook himself and combed the dry leaves out of his hair with his fingers; and marched forth into the comfortable morning sun.

The rustic road was joined by a canal. Round a bend in the canal came plodding a solitary horse, pulling a barge.

With a pleasant swirl of quiet water the barge slid up alongside of him, its sole occupant a big stout woman wearing a linen sun-bonnet.

'A nice morning, ma'am!' she remarked to Toad.

'I dare say it is, ma'am!' responded Toad politely, 'I dare it IS a nice morning to them that's not in sore trouble, like what I am. Here's my married daughter, she sends off to me to come to her at once; so off I comes. And I've left my business to look after itself - I'm in the washing and laundering line, you must know, ma'am - and I've left my young children to look after themselves, and I've lost all my money, and lost my way, and as for what may be happening to my married daughter, why, I don't like to think of it, ma'am!'

'Where might your married daughter be living, ma'am?' asked the barge-woman.

'She lives near to the river, ma'am,' replied Toad. 'Close to a fine house called Toad Hall, Perhaps you may have heard of it.'

'Toad Hall? Why, I'm going that way myself,' replied the barge-woman. 'You come along in the barge with me, and I'll give you a lift.'

She steered the barge close to the bank, and Toad stepped lightly on board. 'Toad's luck again!' thought he. 'I always come out on top!'



'So you're in the washing business, ma'am?' said the barge-woman politely, as they glided along.

'Finest business in the whole country,' said Toad airily. 'Washing, ironing, clear-starching, making up gents' fine shirts for evening wear!'

'And you are very fond of washing?'

'I love it,' said Toad. 'Never so happy as when I've got both arms in the wash-tub'.

'What a bit of luck, meeting you!' observed the barge-woman, thoughtfully.

'Why, what do you mean?' asked Toad, nervously.

'Well, look at me, now,' replied the barge-woman. 'I have got to do all my own, naturally, moving about as I do. There's a heap of things of mine that you'll find in a corner of the cabin. If you'll just put them through the wash-tub as we go along, why, it'll be a pleasure to you, as you rightly say, and a real help to me. You'll find a tub handy, and soap, and a kettle on the stove, and a bucket to haul up water from the canal with.'

Toad was fairly cornered. He looked for escape this way and that, saw that he was too far from the bank for a flying leap, and resigned himself to his fate. 'If it comes to that,' he thought in desperation, 'I suppose any fool can WASH!'

He fetched tub, soap, and other necessaries from the cabin, selected a few garments at random, and set to.

A long half-hour passed, and every minute of it saw Toad getting crosser and crosser. Nothing that he could do to the things seemed to please them or do them good. He tried coaxing, he tried slapping, he tried punching.

A burst of laughter made him straighten himself and look round. The barge-woman was leaning back and laughing till the tears ran down her cheeks.

'I've been watching you all the time,' she gasped. 'Pretty washerwoman you are! Never washed so much as a dish-cloth in your life, I'll lay!'

Toad's temper which had been simmering for some time, now fairly boiled over, and he lost all control of himself.

He shouted; 'Don't you dare to talk to your betters like that! Washerwoman indeed! I would have you to know that I am a Toad, a very well-known, respected, distinguished Toad! I will NOT be laughed at by a bargewoman!'

The woman moved nearer to him and peered under his bonnet keenly and closely. 'Why, so you are!' she cried. 'Well, I never! A horrid, nasty, crawly Toad! And in my nice clean barge, too! Now that is a thing I will NOT have.'

One big mottled arm shot out and caught Toad by a fore-leg, while the other-gripped him fast by a hind-leg. Then the world turned suddenly upside down, and Toad found himself flying through the air, revolving rapidly as he went.

The water, when he eventually reached it with a loud splash, proved quite cold enough for his taste, though its chill was not sufficient to quell his furious temper. He rose to the surface spluttering, and when he had wiped the duckweed out of his eyes the first thing he saw was the barge-woman looking back at him over the stern of the retreating barge and laughing.

He struck out for the shore and had to take a minute or two's rest to recover his breath; then, gathering his wet skirts well over his arms, he started to run after the barge as fast as his legs would carry him, wild for revenge.

The barge-woman was still laughing when he drew up level with her. 'Put yourself through your mangle, washerwoman,' she called out, 'and you'll pass for quite a decent-looking Toad!'

Toad never paused to reply. Running swiftly on he overtook the horse, unfastened the towrope, jumped lightly on the horse's back, and urged it to a gallop by kicking it vigorously in the sides. He looked back, and saw that the barge had run aground on the other side of the canal, and the barge-woman was gesticulating wildly and shouting, 'Stop, stop, stop!'

He had travelled some miles, his horse and he, when the horse stopped, lowered his head, and began to nibble the grass.

He took an affectionate farewell of the horse; and he set forth on his travels again in the best possible spirits.

After some miles of country lanes he reached the high road, and as he turned into it and glanced along its white length, he saw approaching him a speck that turned into a dot and then into a blob, and then into something very familiar; and a double note of warning, only too well known, fell on his delighted ear.

'I will hail them, my brothers of the wheel' said the excited Toad 'and they will give me a lift, of course, and, perhaps, with luck, it may even end in my driving up to Toad Hall in a motor-car!'

He stepped confidently out into the road to hail the motor-car, which came along at an easy pace, slowing down as it neared the lane; when suddenly he became very pale, his heart turned to water, his knees shook and yielded under him, and he doubled up and collapsed with a sickening pain in his interior. And well he might, the unhappy animal; for the approaching car was the very one he had stolen out of the yard of the Red Lion Hotel. And the people in it were the very same people he had sat and watched at lunch in the coffee-room!

He sank down in a shabby, miserable heap in the road. The terrible motorcar drew slowly nearer and nearer, till at last he heard it stop just short of him. Two gentlemen got out and walked round the trembling heap of crumpled misery lying in the road, and one of them said, 'O dear! this is very sad! Here is a poor old thing - a washerwoman apparently - who has fainted in the road! Perhaps she is overcome by the heat, poor creature. Let us lift her into the car and take her to the nearest village, where doubtless she has friends.'

They tenderly lifted Toad into the motorcar and propped him up with soft cushions, and proceeded on their way.

When Toad heard them talk in so kind and sympathetic a way, and knew that he was not recognised, his courage began to revive, and he cautiously opened first one eye and then the other.

'Look!' said one of the gentlemen, 'she is better already. The fresh air is doing her good. How do you feel now, ma'am?'

'Thank you kindly, Sir,' said Toad in a feeble voice, 'I'm feeling a great deal better! I was only thinking, if I might sit on the front seat there, beside the driver, where I could get the fresh air full in my face, I should soon be all right again.'

'What a very sensible woman!' said the gentleman. 'Of course you shall.'

So they carefully helped Toad into the front seat beside the driver, and on they went again.

'Please, Sir,' he said, 'I wish you would kindly let me try and drive the car for a little. I've been watching you carefully, and it looks so easy and so interesting.'

Toad eagerly scrambled into the seat vacated by the driver, took the steering-wheel in his hands, listened to the instructions given him, and set the car in motion, but very slowly and carefully at first.

Toad went a little faster; then faster still, and faster.

The driver tried to interfere, but he pinned him down in his seat with one elbow, and put on full speed. 'Washerwoman, indeed!' he shouted. 'Ho! ho! I am the Toad, the motorcar snatcher, the prison-breaker, the Toad who always escapes!'

With a cry of horror the whole party rose and flung themselves on him. 'Seize him!' they cried, 'seize the Toad, the wicked animal who stole our motorcar!'

With a half-turn of the wheel the Toad sent the car crashing through the low hedge that

ran along the roadside. One mighty bound, a violent shock, and the wheels of the car were churning up the thick mud of a horse-pond. Toad found himself flying through the air with the delicate curve of a swallow. He liked the motion, and was just beginning to wonder whether it would go on until he developed wings and turned into a Toad-bird, when he landed on his back with a thump, in the soft rich grass of a meadow.

He picked himself up and set off running across country as hard as he could, till he was breathless and weary, and had to settle down into an easy walk. 'Ho, ho!' 'Toad again! Toad, as usual, comes out on the top!

O, how clever I am! How clever, how clever, how very clever - '

A slight noise at a distance behind him made him turn his head and look.

About two fields off, a chauffeur in his leather gaiters and two large rural policemen were visible, running towards him as hard as they could go!

Poor Toad sprang to his feet and pelted away again, his heart in his mouth. 'O, my!' he gasped, as he panted along. He glanced back, and saw to his dismay that they were gaining on him. He struggled on wildly, looking back over his shoulder at the now triumphant

enemy, when suddenly the earth failed under his feet, he grasped at the air, and, splash! he found himself head over ears in deep water. In his blind panic he had run straight into the river!

He rose to the surface and tried to grasp the reeds and the rushes that grew along the water's edge close under the bank, but the stream was so strong that it tore them out of his hands, then down he went, and came up breathless and spluttering. Then slowly and with difficulty he drew himself up out of the water.

As he sighed and blew and stared before him into the dark hole, some bright small thing shone and twinkled in its depths, moving towards him. As it approached, a face grew up gradually around it, and it was a familiar face!

Brown and small, with whiskers.

Grave and round, with neat ears and silky hair.

It was the Water Rat!