

The Trouble-Free Troubles of Great Nephew Toad

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Toad. Archibald Wilberforce Ponsonby Toad, to be exact. I am - and it's quite possibly my only claim to fame - the great nephew of the immortal Toad of Toad Hall (now a National Trust property open five days a week). You know the chap. He's the one Kenneth Grahame wrote about in that remarkable book called *The Wind in the Willows*. You remember, the Toad who was a friend of that clever water rat called Ratty, the nice but dim Mole and the exceedingly pompous but usually right-about-everything Badger. The Toad who was always getting into hot water of some sort, trouble that the others had to sort out for him, like the time when the weasels and stoats took over Toad Hall. Sometimes though he sorted things out himself, such as the utterly amazing occasion when he escaped from jail disguised as a washerwoman. A bit of a lad, my Great Uncle Toad, someone you could always rely on to get into serious mischief and never mind the consequences.

Now my problem is this: no matter how hard I've tried, I've simply been unable to get into trouble like my dear old great uncle. It's depressing. I've tried hard and I've tried often to get into mischief, but somehow things never turn out as I'd hoped or planned. It's my own fault really to some extent for having friends like Ratty, Mole and Badger - and yes, you're quite right, they're all descended from the heroes of the same name in *The Wind in the Willows*. And yes, you're right again, they're the ones who keep getting me out of the trouble that I'm desperately trying to get myself into. It really is infuriating. Let me show you what I mean.

Well, one summer's day we were out on the river together in Ratty's rowing skiff. I was at the oars, doing rather well I thought in my slightly clumsy way, when suddenly my mobile phone went off. They just absolutely hate mobile phones, my three friends, and I will admit that I had agreed to switch mine off when I got into the boat. But I forgot, or I pressed the wrong button or something. So after it rang they all started telling me what they thought about it. Badger was first.

"Toad", he said, in that stern, disappointed voice he often uses when talking to me, "I thought we had agreed that those wretched buzzing things and the idle, silly chatter that goes with them spoiled the peace of the river".

"Yes, Badger. Sorry, Badger", I replied, trying to sound humble because I knew that was always the best way with Badger, "I . . ."

"Sorry's not good enough, Toad", growled Badger, while Ratty and Mole nodded agreement. Meanwhile we were drifting steadily downstream, not really keeping a proper lookout for other boats as Ratty always said we should, "You know the rule. Now hand over the wretched thing so I can get rid of it".

“Get rid of it where?” I demanded in alarm.

“In the river, you lunkhead, as we agreed”.

“But Badger”, I protested. “This is a brand new top of the range Twitphone 5000 with preset texting, a camera with fifty million pixies, internet access, a built-in toothpick and a backscratcher with fly-swotter attachment”.

Badger was unmoved, “It would be, Toad. You always buy the most expensive toys. Now hand it over”.

I was going to object and stand up for my rights, but then I thought better of it. Long experience had taught me there was little point in arguing with Badger. Unless you absolutely enjoy losing arguments, that is. Even so, I couldn’t completely lose face.

“No”, said I, “If it is to be thrown into the jolly old river, then it is I who shall do the hurling”.

“All right”, said Badger, obviously suspicious. “Go ahead then”.

Watched by three frowning faces, I rested my oars and then lifted the still-ringing phone from my waistcoat pocket - the dial showed it was another call from my bank manager, probably about my overdraft. After a last lingering glance at the internet access panel, I threw it as hard as I could manage back over my shoulder, without looking to see where it might end up.

“Nice throw”, said Ratty admiringly. He turns out for the local village cricket team, you see, and so knows about such things. But then he added, “Oh dear, dear me”.

I heard the sound of breaking glass followed by an angry voice demanding, “Which of you stupid flaming idiots threw that flaming phone through my flaming cabin window?”

Now here, it occurred to me at once, was trouble worthy of my Great Uncle Toad, serious trouble that someone could write about in a book describing *my* adventures. Turning round, I saw a big red-faced man standing on the bows of a large cabin cruiser while his wife steered. He had my mobile phone in his hand and was pointing at a broken window in the boat’s main cabin. And, I was pleased to see, he was very angry indeed. In fact he looked as if he was about to explode. This was far too good an opportunity to miss. I stood up.

“I di. . .”

“I DID!” bellowed Badger, before I could finish, “And I’m really very sorry and I will of course pay for any damage”.

You could almost see the man go down like a pricked balloon. “Oh, all right”, said he, “These things will happen. There’s no serious harm done. Better be a little more careful in future though”.

After which they exchanged names and addresses and that, to all intents and purposes, was that. Another golden opportunity to get into serious trouble completely wasted through reasonable behaviour.

Now, let’s get one thing straight. I, as a great nephew of the immortal Toad of

Toad Hall, have made it a point of honour never to apologise. What's more, right or wrong, I always make sure that I call the other chap a rude name like "Fat face" or "Big nose", something to make things a whole lot worse. Unfortunately even that doesn't work sometimes, as I shall now explain.

There was that time a year or so ago when the four of us rowed along the Thames from Ratty's riverside cottage (the one left to him by his great uncle) to picnic ashore beside a favourite willow tree on the edge of a delightful meadow. The sun was hard at work, shining away like a great fried egg in the sky. Dragonflies hovered near the water, butterflies played tag between the wild flowers. Swallows swooped and swifts darted. We even glimpsed a kingfisher flying low along the river like a glistening jewel. Ducks, geese and swans gathered in the hope of sharing some of our picnic, which of course they did. It's odd, but Ratty and Mole always insist on calling our food "the provender", which I think is a bit of a funny word for it. But then Ratty is an old fashioned sort of chap and Mole usually follows his example.

Anyway there we were, stretched out on Badger's old picnic rug, nicely full-up with "the provender" and at peace with ourselves and indeed with old Mother Nature. Until, that is, this man arrived, a rather large man who seemed, from his sour expression, to have eaten something that badly disagreed with him. A man with the troubles of the world on his broad shoulders.

"Did you know this was private property?", he asked in a voice like a foghorn, without even saying 'hello' first.

Ratty raised himself up on one elbow and peered at the man. "No", he said, "But thank you for telling us. It was very kind and thoughtful of you".

For some reason this polite remark of Ratty's seemed to make the man even more upset. He told us in no uncertain terms that it was indeed private property we were picnicking on. He said that he was some sort of river warden and that if we didn't "flaming well clear off", he would throw us all into "the flaming river".

That did it. I knew an opportunity for some real bother when I saw one. Before Badger and the others could stop me I had leapt to my feet and called the man "Fat face!" and "Big nose!". Then, as he peered down at me in astonishment, I waited for the inevitable reaction.

"Trouble", I heard Ratty mutter to Mole. Both quietly stood up and rolled back their sleeves. So did Badger, though only after reaching for the big stick he never goes anywhere without.

Now for it, I thought, raising my fists and flexing my knees like a boxer. At last I was in for some real trouble.

But no. Instead of roaring with rage and charging at me with his fists windmilling, the man suddenly broke down into an absolute waterfall of tears.

"I know", he said, "I know I've got a fat face and a big nose. That's why I took

this job, to be away from people so's I wouldn't be laughed at all the time like I was in my other jobs". His tears quickly turned to sobs so that even I, a hard-hearted warrior toad, began to feel just a tiny bit sorry for him. Mole, I noticed, was wiping his eyes with a green handkerchief and even Badger looked concerned.

"There, there, old chap", said Ratty at last, rolling down his sleeves and patting the man on the arm. "Why Badger, Mole and I all have rather large noses and as for a fat face, well they don't come much fatter than old Toadie there. He's really quite an ugly brute, don't you think?"

"Oi!", said I, "Go easy".

Mopping his eyes on a sleeve, the man looked at each of us in turn. "Yes, I suppose you're right", he said, his gaze finally coming to rest on me. "And yes, you're correct, he really is an ugly brute. But. . . but you're animals and so it doesn't really matter. Toads especially are meant to be ugly, though perhaps not quite so ugly as this one. Just look at those horrible bulging eyeballs. Yuk".

"Now look here!" said I, raising my fists again, "That's fighting talk".

But the man seemed not to have heard. Ratty had just handed him one of our sandwiches and he was busy chewing on it with a look of utter delight on his face.

"Cheese, tomato, gherkin and pickle", he said, licking his lips. "My all time favourite. Well thanks, gents, for everything. I feel better now and so I'll be on my way. Stay here as long as you like. Be my guest".

Looking at me again, he began to smile and shake his head. "Just imagine having to go through life being that flaming ugly and green with it", he said, chuckling to himself as he walked off. "Just imagine. Poor ugly blighter".

After that I sulked for the rest of the afternoon. I sulked all the way back to the cottage and most of the evening. Until I found out there was apple crumble for supper - with cream, sultanas and custard.

Now you would have thought that one way of falling into some good honest trouble would be to have a run-in with the police, the brave lads and lassies of our constabulary. Not real crime, you understand, but just a little bit of naughtiness like borrowing an officer's helmet for a while or blowing raspberries at one of their sergeants. But whenever I've tried to do either of these things I've always run into a problem or, more accurately, a lack of opportunity. Obviously, to borrow a policeman's helmet you must first find a policeman. The same applies if you want to blow a raspberry at a police sergeant.

Nowadays, though, unlike when my great uncle was alive and the police walked or bicycled everywhere, they never seem to leave their cars. They're always rushing about somewhere. Whoosh, whoosh, round and about they go, sirens blaring and lights flashing. Another serious difficulty is that policemen today

rarely wear their helmets, no doubt because you can't wear a helmet in a car unless it's been specially designed to have helmet-shaped bumps in the roof. Obvious really. So instead they wear flat caps like bus-conductors and, as I'm sure you'll understand, there's really very little fun to be had in borrowing a bus-conductor's cap.

Then one happy day I saw a picture in the newspaper of two policemen on duty at the famous Henley Royal Regatta. Both were wearing helmets! There and then I made plans to visit the next regatta. Foolishly, I told Ratty, Mole and Badger and they of course decided to come with me, making a day of it by rowing there in Ratty's skiff.

"That way, we'll make sure that Toad doesn't get arrested", joked Badger. Little did he realise that this was exactly what I had in mind. Then, for utter bliss, to spend several nights on bread and water in a dank dungeon, like the one Great Uncle Toad was thrown into all those years ago.

It took us much longer than Ratty originally thought to row to Henley. The locks along the way were all chock-full of larger boats heading for the regatta and we often had trouble squeezing ourselves in. Worse, we were late starting out because Badger and Ratty didn't like my new orange, pink and purple-striped rowing blazer and matching cap. They made me take it off in case I accidentally frightened any sensitive children we might meet. So back I went and changed into my green and orange tweed suit, with a natty yellow bow-tie. Ratty didn't like this outfit either but, as we were late, he said it would have to do. Anyway we got there eventually and moored the skiff by the well-known Leander Club. Ratty is a member, lucky chap. For some odd reason they don't accept toads as members, even distinguished toads such as myself who can row a bit and know exactly how to dress properly for special occasions.

Then bingo! I saw them. Not one or two, but three policemen in magnificent crested helmets and posh uniforms. They were standing near the water's edge in front of a large candy-striped tent that seemed to be positively bursting at the seams with cheerful, laughing spectators, all come to come to see the best rowers in the world do their stuff. Somewhere nearby a jazz band was playing.

Then and only then did something occur to me that I should have thought of before, stupid toad that I very occasionally am - and a rather short toad that I permanently am. All three policemen were extremely tall. So unless I placed a ladder up against one of them - which I thought might be noticed - there was no possibility that I would be able to borrow one of their helmets. No helmet, no arrest, no night in a dank dungeon on bread and water to boast about afterwards. But then another clever thought came to me. Earlier I had seen several men lifting children onto their shoulders so that they could see the races. I knew what

to do next.

“Badger, old chap”, said I, in my most innocent voice, while he was following a coxless fours race through his binoculars, “I can’t see much, not being as tall as you. Do you think you could lift me up onto your shoulder so that I can get a decent view of the next race over the heads of the crowd?”

“I suppose so”, he said, peering at me doubtfully. Returning the binoculars to their case, he bent down and, with a loud grunt and a complaint about his bad back, picked me up and sat me on his shoulder.

“That’s fine”, I said, trying not to sound too pleased. “Now move a bit over towards the right, over there a bit more. . . . closer to those three policemen”.

“Policemen?” repeated Badger suspiciously. “You’re not up to any of your blasted pranks are you, Toad? This is a respectable club, y’know.”

“Of course not”, I replied, fingers crossed behind my back. “It’s just that where they’re standing has just got to be the best place to watch the boats cross the finishing line.”

“Oh, all right”, grumbled Badger.

But, as we were edging closer to the unsuspecting constables, one of them turned round, saw me on Badger’s shoulder and grinned.

“Hello, hello, hello”, he said. “What have we here? Why it’s the distinguished Mr. Badger of our very own neighbourhood watch committee and today with an amphibian on his shoulder - and just look at the way it’s dressed”. Then, would you believe it, while his friends laughed, he patted me on the head. Blasted cheek!

“Good afternoon, Constable Higgins, how nice to see you again”, said Badger in his formal voice while I turned bright red with embarrassment. Being called an amphibian was bad enough, but to be patted on the head like a baby and referred to as ‘it’. Well really! A chap has his pride after all. I was about to call the officer “Fatface” when suddenly the crowd roared, then cheered and roared again, much louder this time. It was the final of the eights.

Blades flashing in the sunlight, two boats were racing towards the finishing line. The men at the oars were straining every muscle, while their coxes shouted and screamed encouragement. Even the policemen seemed excited, as well they might because one of the boats was rowed by eight remarkably large members of the constabulary.

“Come on the coppers!!”, the three officers yelled together, hands cupped round their mouths, “Come on, pull, pull for all you’re worth!”

While the crowd cheered even more wildly, the two boats sprinted for the finish. Only inches separated them - or a canvas I think the rowing people call it.

“Pull, pull!” the officers shouted again.

Then, as the police eight nosed slightly ahead to win the race. “Yes, yes, yes!”

The three beaming policemen punched the air like footballers who'd just scored a goal. Next, to my astonishment, they removed their helmets and hurled them high above the crowd in a victory salute.

Two of the falling helmets were soon caught by their owners. But the third, chucked higher than the others, whirled a bit in the air before coming down to land on Badger's shoulder, the shoulder on which I happened to be sitting.

The next thing I knew the helmet and I hit the ground together, with me sort of wearing the helmet, though it was rather on the large size for my head. Seizing the moment - something we toads are famous for - I picked myself up, gripped the sides of the helmet and ran for it as fast as my short legs would carry me. I couldn't see where I was going but no matter. I had my precious helmet at last!

There was pandemonium. Women shrieked as I brushed past their legs, children howled, waiters dropped trays of glasses and plates, tables were tipped over. Voices said things like, "Look out, that helmet's got legs!". Then someone shouted, "Grab it quickly before it ends up in the river!"

That should have warned me that I was heading in the wrong direction. But, being me, I ran twice as fast anyway until suddenly there was nothing under my feet except for yards and yards of empty space. For a glorious few seconds I floated down like one of those parachute chappies, thinking how clever I was to have escaped and what a great adventure I was having. Then I hit the water, the rather chilly and very wet water of Old Father Thames. Somewhere that jazz band was still playing away merrily.

I didn't panic, I'll say that for myself. I was trapped inside a policeman's helmet, facing an awful watery doom with absolutely no chance of rescue. Well actually, truthfully, I wasn't because the helmet soon turned over and became quite a respectable boat. So suddenly there I was being carried downstream by the current and making my triumphant escape. Thoroughly enjoying myself, I waved to the crowd, got quacked at by ducks and, with chest puffed out, thought how proud Great Uncle Toad would have been of me.

There can be absolutely no doubt that I would have got clean away had not one of those darned policemen spoiled things by reaching out and grabbing the helmet as I sailed by.

"Gotcha!" he said, as the crowd applauded and cheered. My great adventure was over. Or was it? Surely - oh joy! - my next stop was certain to be a dank dungeon in the nearest police station. Why, after all I'd done, it was practically guaranteed. Except that it wasn't.

Now you might reasonably have expected that, having made off with a policemen's helmet in front of dozens of witnesses, I would have been handcuffed, cautioned about not saying anything, dragged to the police station and charged with an offence serious enough to land me with at least a week in that dank dungeon. But no, instead everyone laughed and shook my hand, including all the policemen. They said it was the most exciting thing they'd seen at a regatta for many years. They said I must be sure to come back again next year. Why I believe that photographs of me and the helmet appeared in the special regatta edition of the Henley Gazette.

Badger, Mole and Ratty guessed what I'd been up to, of course. They shook their heads sadly and said there was nothing to be done with me. It was in my toad's nature, they said, to misbehave. I couldn't help it. It was in the blood. Now, that's all right for them to say. But if behaving badly is in my blood, then why on earth am I so completely hopeless at it? Will someone please tell me.

I put this question to Badger after we'd returned to Ratty's cottage later that day, though not of course until everyone had calmed down and eaten a good supper. Ratty and Mole were doing the washing-up and no doubt discussing my latest folly.

"Well you see, Toad", Badger said, in that ponderous way of his. "It could be that you're just not meant to be bad. Now your Great Uncle Toad, he wasn't really bad either, not according to my old Great Uncle Badger anyway. I remember him telling me that your Great Uncle Toad had a way of getting caught and locked-up that was really quite remarkable. He almost never got away with anything. You, on the other hand, seemed bound never to succeed in being bad. It's sad for you really, if not for the rest of us and especially the police".

Hanging my head, I sighed a long and despairing sigh. "Well, I suppose that means I'll have to be good from now on, doesn't it?"

I felt Badger's paw touch my arm. Very gently he said, "Well, not quite all the time, Toad old fellow. Life would be really dull round here if you behaved yourself *all* the time".

Just then I heard the sound - the glorious sound - of a powerful motor car moving at speed along the road behind the cottage. Turning round I saw that it was a red turbo-charged Maserari GT sports coupe with alloy wheels and four exhausts. "Toot, toot!" it went.

"Poop-poop!" said I, without thinking. Then again, "Poop-poop!"

Badger chuckled, a deep rumbling sound that seemed to rise up from his boots, "That's my Toad", he said.

