

Audition Piece Four – pages 62 – 68

These days an offender of Toad's social position and financial resources could expect to be sent directly to an open prison, but Toad's prison is anything but open. He has the dungeon to himself, it's true, but Toad is not at the moment disposed to look on the positive side. Dressed in the traditional prison garb of overalls printed with broad (green) arrows, he sits on his little bench contemplating his lot with no equanimity at all. Were there a psychiatrist attached to this gaol he would diagnose Toad as 'subject to violent mood swings.

Toad Poor Toad. Poor little Toady. All aloney. On his owny. Nobody wants him. Nobody cares. I had a big house once. Servants. Friends. Wise old Badger. Clever intelligent Rat. Sensible little Mole. Why did I not listen to you? O foolish, foolish Toad. It's the end of everything. At least it's the end of Toad, which comes to the same thing. Thrust into this dark, damp dungeon, despised the world, deserted by his friends, whom he entertained entirely at his own expense. Ungrateful Badger. Sanctimonious Rat. Silly Mole. Where are they when I need them? All nice and snug at home while I'm stuck here for twenty years. Twenty years! Oh, it's not fair. *(He goes into a paroxysm of grief, kicking his legs and banging his fists on the ground.)* I can't bear it.

There is a shaft of light as the Gaoler's Daughter comes in with a plate.

G's Daughter Dinner.

Toad Dinner? Dinner! At a time like this? I couldn't. *(Pause)* What is it?

G's Daughter Bubble and squeak.

Toad Bubble. And squeak. How insensitive people are. No. No. Never.

G's Daughter I'll take it away then.

Toad *(hastily)* No. I might just manage to force down a mouthful. After all, I owe it to my friends. *(Snuffling, he takes a mouthful or two.)*

G's Daughter You like that?

Toad Not particularly.

G's Daughter Oh well. *(She makes to take it away again.)*

Toad No. I mean I don't dislike it. It's perfectly acceptable, in its way. Only, it's not what I'm used to at Toad Hall.

G's Daughter Toad Hall? Tell me about Toad Hall.

Toad Toad Hall is a self-contained gentleman's residence in a picturesque riverside setting. It is very unique in its way and though parts of it date back to the fourteenth century it has up to the minute sanitation and the last word in billiard rooms.

G's Daughter It sounds paradise.

Toad Toad Hall? (*airily*) No. Just a well-run gentleman's residence.

G's Daughter I wish I could see it, Toady. (When all's said and done, he is rather a pet.)

Toad I wish I could take you there, my dear. (She's a comely enough lass.)

They cuddle.

Who knows? Perhaps one day I can find you a position below stairs.

They uncuddle, smartish.

G's Daughter Below stairs? You're a convict. You're in here for twenty years.

Toad I was forgetting. Twenty years! Twenty years!

G's Daughter There, there. I'm a fool to myself, I know but I've got a real soft spot for you.

Toad I know. So many people do. It's known as charm.

He blows his nose vigorously and while he doesn't quite examine the results, it's still a bit off-putting.

G's Daughter I just wish I could think of a way of getting you out of here.

There's a distant call, echoing down the prison corridors: WASHING! BRING OUT YOUR WASHING!

Here comes my aunt. She's a washerwoman.

Toad Think no more about it. I have several aunts who ought to be washerwomen.

The call gets closer. WASHING! PUT OUT YOUR WASHING!

G's Daughter She washes for all the convicts in the castle.

Toad How lovely for her... all those terrible vests and big men's smalls.

The Washerwoman comes into the dungeon.

G's Daughter (*thoughtfully*) Actually, you're not unlike one another....

Toad I beg your pardon?

G's Daughter (*still thoughtful*) Only, she can come and go as she pleases...

Toad Lucky her.

You can see what's coming and I know it's no business of mine but prisoners in plays and operas so often escape by getting round gaolers' daughters that you'd think that for gaolers daughterlessness would have long ago become part of the job specification.

G's Daughter (*decisively*) Listen Toad. You're very rich and aunty's very poor.

Toad That's the way the world is, I'm afraid. Aunty is doubtless carefree and happy, whereas we rich are burdened with our responsibilities. I myself am on the board of several companies.

G's Daughter What I mean, silly, is that if you made it worth her while, she might lend you her clothes and you could escape disguised as her. Aunty!

Toad Me dress up as a washerwoman? What a distasteful idea.

But the Gaoler's Daughter is already explaining her plan to Aunty.

Couldn't I be a lady novelist... or a high-born prison visitor? I mean *her*?

Washerwoman Him? I don't see the likeness at all.

G's Daughter (*mouthing*) Give her some money.

Toad, never quick on the uptake where self-preservation is concerned, doesn't immediately twig. The Gaoler's Daughter mimes bribery.

Toad Oh yes, sorry (*giving her a coin*).

Washerwoman I do begin to see a distant resemblance.

More money changes hands.

Yes. Come to think of it, we could be sisters.

G's Daughter Now, aunty – the first thing is to change your clothes.

Washerwoman What for? It's not Friday.

Toad The disguise, madam.

G's Daughter Undress.

Washerwoman Here? I'm a married woman.

Toad Are you stupid or something? You've had your money.

Washerwoman Oh yes. That's it, isn't it! You've been paid. Now take your clothes off! Very well, but only to my bloomers. A line's got to be drawn somewhere. *(She begins to undress – an awesome sight.)*

Toad Believe me, madam, this is far more distressing for me than it is for you. They're so smelly.

Washerwoman I wash other people's clothes. I'm not paid to wash my own.

G's Daughter Now we'll tie you up.

Washerwoman Tied up? You didn't see anything about being tied up.

Toad Let me. They'll imagine I overpowered her.

Washerwoman Get off me. *(She sends Toad flying.)*

G's Daughter Aunty, you've been paid, behave.

Washerwoman I don't care. The nasty little blighter, I'll...

Toad That's enough out of you, madam.

Toad puts a laundry bag over the Washerwoman's head, which puts paid to further argument.

G's Daughter Now Toad. Put the dress on. You'll make a very good woman.

Toad Yes. I'm not unattractive...though I'm not sure this is really my colour.

G's Daughter You look just the ticket. Aunty, stop moaning.

A furious grunt.

I don't think it will be difficult to get past the guard. My aunt is a woman of unblemished reputation and a keen Methodist and the guard is sure to keep his distance.

Toad What do you mean, keep his distance?

G's Daughter Well, you know men. So good luck, little toad, and if you get back to your nice house remember the humble gaoler's daughter who took a fancy to you.

Toad I shall. I shall. Perhaps when I open the house to ordinary people, you can come over to tea. Bye bye to Aunty.

The sack lunges blindly at Toad but happily misses.

Toad This is a far far better thing you do than you ever did before. Free at last! And now I must make a beeline for home where I can get out of this malodorous frock. And how convenient! A railway station.

A train has arrived, stopped and the Train Driver jumped down to polish his engine.

Train Driver Hello, mother, you don't look very happy.

Toad Oh, sir, I am a poor washerwoman who's lost all her money and can't get home.

Train Driver Dear me. And you've got kiddies waiting for you, I dare say.

Toad Nine of them. At least. There may be more, only they never keep still long enough for me to count them. And they'll be hungry and playing with matches and getting their little heads stuck fast in the railings. Oh dear, oh dear.

Train Driver Tell me, do you wash a good shirt?

Toad Shirts are my speciality. Shirts are to me, sir, what daffodils is to Wordsworth. *(And deprivation was to Philip Larkin.)*

Train Driver Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. I go through a power of shirts in this job. So if you'll wash me a few when you get home, I'll give you a ride on the engine.

Toad Oh, sir, thank you, sir.

Train Driver Hop on.

Toad Well, I won't hop on. If I *hopped* on somebody might think I was a frog or something of that kind. The idea! Ha ha! There we are.

Train Driver Comfy? Off we go.

There's a rush of steam, the sound of wheels, a whistle and the train is off.

Toad Oh, isn't this exciting... the fields, the trees, the world flying past. This is the way to travel! Tell me, Mr. Engine Driver, how much would an engine like this cost?

Train Driver Cost? You're not thinking of buying one?

Toad Me, a poor washerwoman, how could I?

Train Driver You'd have to wash a deal of shirts before you saved up for one of these. I say, that's unusual, the signal's against us.

We see a signal fall and the train screeches to a halt.