

SEVEN O'CLOCK STORIES



Twelfth Night: About Duckie the Stepchild and the Little Ship



In the door of the workshop stood the three happy children, watching the Toyman.

It was one of the very nicest places on the whole farm. Tools of all sorts, bright and sharp, lay on the table. Lumber of every kind lay piled against the walls. The shelves were filled with cans of paint. All the colours of the rainbow were in those cans. The children could tell that by the pretty splashes of the paint dripping down their sides.

Back and forth, back and forth swung the arms of the Toyman. He was very busy over something—something very important it must be, for he never talked, only worked and whistled away.

“Oh dear! I wish I knew what it was,” sighed Marmaduke. Anyway he knew it was something for them. Father Green had given the Toyman a holiday, all for himself, to do as he liked. And of course he’d make something for them.

On the edge of the table was a vise, a big tool with iron jaws. In the iron jaws was a block of wood. The Toyman screwed the vise—very tight—so tight the wood couldn’t budge. Then he shaved this side of the block, then the other side, with a plane, a tool with a very sharp edge. Clean white shavings fell on the floor, some of them twisting like Hepzebiah’s curls.

“I wonder what it’s going to be,” Marmaduke repeated.

Jehosophat was pretty sure he knew.

“I’ll bet it’s a boat,” he said.

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The Toyman chuckled.

“Right you are, Son. It’s the Good Ship—well, let’s see. All boats have a name, you know. What do you think would be a good name for a fine ship?”

Jehosophat had one, right on the tip of his tongue.

“The Arrow.”

The Toyman thought this over.

“That isn’t bad,” said he.

Then he turned to Marmaduke.

“What’s your idea for a name, little chap?”

Marmaduke thought and thought. He looked out through the door and saw the Party Bird, the vain Peacock, parading up and down, showing off its beautiful tail, and “Peacock” was the only name he could think of.

Jehosophat laughed out loud.

“That’s no name for a boat.”

And Marmaduke had to shout back—as little boys will, losing his temper:

“’Tis too! ”

The Toyman stopped the quarrel, just as he always did, with something pleasant or funny he said. Then he leaned over and picked up three chips of wood.

“I’ll write the names on these little chips,” he explained, “and we’ll choose.”

Putting his hand on Hepzebiah’s sunny curls, he asked that little girl:

“What name do you think would be nice for the boat?”

Now Hepzebiah really didn’t know just what it all was about. But she had heard Marmaduke say “Peacock,” so she took her finger out of her mouth just long enough to point at the Guinea-hen, who was screeching horribly out in the barnyard.

“The Guinea-hen! Ha, ha! That’s a good one!” The Toyman was forever saying that and laughing at the funny things the children said.

Hepzebiah, thinking that this was a nice sort of a game, took her finger out of her mouth and pointed again—this time out at the pond where the swans were sailing, like pretty white ships themselves.

“The very thing,” exclaimed the Toyman. “White Swan’s a fine name for a boat!”

And he wrote “White Swan” on one chip, “Peacock” on another, and “Arrow” on the last. Then he held them towards the children.

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“The smallest must choose first,” he said, and Hepzebiah took one of the little white pieces of wood from the Toyman’s hand. He turned it over and read:

“White Swan.”

“We’d go a good ways before we’d get a better name,” he decided. “When the boat’s all finished and all sails set, she’ll sail away just like a swan; you see if she doesn’t.”

The hull of the boat was finished now, and on the bow, at the very front, he nailed a thin little stick, with tiny nails. This was the bowsprit.

On the keel at the very bottom, he fastened a piece of lead so she wouldn’t “turn turtle”—turn over, he meant, when her sails were set and the wind blew too hard.

Then choosing some sticks—very carefully, for they must be straight—he tucked the boat under his arm and, with the three children close at his heels, walked over to the pond and sat down under the Crying Tree, where the sun shone bright and warm.

Out came the magic knife and he whittled away at the little sticks; whittled and whistled and smiled all the time.

Sliver after sliver of the wood fell on the ground. Sometimes one would drop into the water and float away like a fairy canoe, with the green willow leaves that fell from the Crying Tree.

So under the magic knife the little ship grew and grew, till the masts were fitted too, and set fast and tight in the clean smooth deck.

“But where are the sails?” asked Jehosophat impatiently.

A funny answer the Toyman made.

He just said:

“Hold your horses, Sonny.”

The teacher in the Red Schoolhouse up the road would have reproved him for this, but the children thought whatever the Toyman said was all right.

Of course he meant not to be too impatient and—but just then the dinner horn sounded, way out over the pond and over the fields, and the children ran into the house, just as you would have done too.

It didn’t take long to finish dinner that day. For desert they had blackberry pie, very juicy and nice, and they didn’t even wait to wash the red marks of that

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pie from their faces but just ran for the Crying Tree.

The Toyman felt in all of his six big pockets. And out came needles and thread, and pieces of clean muslin besides.

Stitch, stitch, stitch went his fingers, for a thousand stitches or more. And bye and bye the sails were all cut and sewed and fitted on the three little masts.

Then the Toyman stopped.

“We haven’t christened her yet,” he said. “We should have done that long ago.”

In his pockets he rummaged again, those pockets which always held just the right thing. It was a small bottle this time, all filled with tiny pink pills. Much nicer these were, the children thought, than that yellow stuff in the big bottle they hated so.

The Toyman poured the little pills out.

“What’s the use of medicine on a nice day like this,” said he.

And he filled the bottle with water and put back the stopper.

“When ships are launched,” he explained, “folks break a bottle over the bow when they name her.”

“All right, I’ll do that,” said Jehosophat, but the Toyman stopped him.

“Hold on there, Sonny, that’s the ladies’ job.”

Then he called Hepzebiah and gave her the bottle.

“Now, little girl, you stand here and say: ‘I christen thee White Swan.’”

But, “I ckwithen Wite Thwan” was the best she could do.

“Now drop the bottle!”

She opened her fingers and, sure enough, the little bottle fell right on the deck and broke all in little pieces, and the glistening drops splashed over the bow, and so the good ship “White Swan” got her name.

Into the water the Toyman pushed the little ship. The wind filled her sails and off she went, racing away before the wind to join the beautiful birds for whom she had been named.

Around the pond and over the bridge went the Toyman, to the other side. When the ship reached the opposite shore he swung it around and sent it back on the return voyage. The “White Swan” had reached port safely, when the Toyman said:

“It’s funny what different opinions folks have. Some like the water and some don’t. Now the swans and the ducks, and that little ship, and the fish, and the

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froggies, and Uncle Roger, and you and I, we think it’s fine. But Mr. Stuck-up, and Miss Crosspatch, and Old Mother Wyandotte, and Mis’ Fizzeltree, why they won’t go near it at all.”

“That is funny,” said Jehosophat.

Then the Toyman added:

“Just listen to that.”

Old Mother Wyandotte was right near them, clucking in fright.

“Don’t—don’t—don’t you do it!” she was calling to one of her children who was looking longingly at the cool pond.

Around her were all her children, fast growing up now. They were all soft and white but one. Like good little chickens they were looking for bugs, all but one.

He was the little fellow they had noticed before, the funny little fellow with a longer bill than the rest, and the odd-looking feet. His soft downy back was turning black. And he was starting for that pretty water shining in the pond.

Jehosophat looked him all over.

“Why, he looks like a duck.”

“What did you expect?” laughed the Toyman. “He is a duck. Old Mother Wyandotte thinks he’s her child, but he’s only a step-child. Ha! Ha! Somebody must have put another egg in her nest.”

Over in the garden were pretty flowers called Bleeding Hearts. They were very pink, and Jehosophat’s face turned the very same colour. Well he knew who had stolen into the House of the White Wyandottes and put that big duck’s egg under Old Mother Hen. And now it had turned out a real little duckling, that black little fellow Mother Wyandotte was scolding so.

“Don’t—don’t—don’t—don’t you do it,” she was shouting still.

But little black Duckie had made up his mind. He was headed straight for that shining water.

Around Mother Wyandotte gathered all her relatives to talk over the matter. They were disgusted. That one of their family should disgrace them so!

“Respectable chickens spend their time on the ground,” said Granny Wyandotte with a toss of her comb, “and never, never get wet, if they can help it, not even their feet.”

“True—true—quite true,” all the Wyandotte Aunties agreed.

But their second cousins and the third cousins too, the ducks and the geese

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and the swans, said they were wrong.

“Little Duckie’s a sensible chap. What better place can there be to play in than that nice cool pond?”

And all the fishes swimming around, from the big pickerel down to the littlest “minnie,” waggled their fins and tails to show they agreed too, while the froggies on the lily-pad croaked:

“Gomme on—gomme on!”

They were giving little Duckie a warm invitation to play in the water, you see.

Duckie was right at the edge now and Mother Hen, who was really his step-mother, made one last appeal, but the ducks one and all called:

“Back, back, back!”

They weren’t talking to Duckie. They meant the White Wyandottes. They were taking his part, you see, though not for one minute did they guess he was their child, their very own .

Duckie appreciated that too. Perhaps Old Father Drake, the head of all the Duck family, wouldn’t let Step-father Wyandotte punish him that night if he did try the water.

I don’t believe Step-father Wyandotte really cared very much. At first he was a little mad but, after scolding a little, he shouted:

“Through, through, through—I’m through with yoooooooouuu.”

He wouldn’t have anything more to do with little Duckie. I guess he suspected he was just a step-child after all. So he just grumbled to himself as he speared a fat tumble-bug with his beak:

“Ur, ur—I don’t care!”

He had enough children anyway. But the Gold Rooster on the top of the barn looked down, laughing at him. He couldn’t really laugh, you know, or flap his wings, but he swung from west to southwest and back again, as if to say:

“I knew it. I knew it. They fooled you!”

Old Father Drake, the head of the duck family, started for the water. Mother Duck and all the little ducks went in too. They were going to show Duckie the way.

He just couldn’t stand it any longer. So—plopp in he went and paddled around after the others, and ducked his head under the water to catch his dinner, just as a real duckling should.

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“Better than grubbing for bugs in the dirty earth, this nice clean cool water,” quacked he, and he was as happy as happy could be.

The Toyman was looking at him with a smile on his face.

“He’s just like me,” he said at last, and the children, surprised at that, asked all together:

“Who’s like you?”

“That little duck there.”

“Like you!” Jehosophat shouted. “Why he doesn’t look like you at all!”

The Toyman puffed away on his corn cob pipe before he answered:

“Oh inside he’s the same. I was just like him when I was a kid. I had a step-mother, too, and she and all the step-uncles and aunts scolded and scolded, and whipped me besides, because I wanted to go to sea on a great big ship.”

“What did you do?”

They didn’t really need to ask that question, for hadn’t the Toyman been most everywhere, and hadn’t he told them many a story about the great sea and the ships?

“Yes, they all said I would drown or become a wicked bad man.”

Marmaduke thought he would like to do something to those step-uncles and aunts who treated the Toyman so badly.

“They don’t know what they’re talking about,” he shouted. “You’re good as anybody in the world.”

“Thank you, little feller,” replied the Toyman, patting his head. “But they said I would, just the same. They talked just like those old Wyandottes there.

“But I fooled them all,” he went on. “And one night, when it was dark, just a few stars out, I climbed out of bed and jumped out of the window and ran away.

“I walked and I walked, miles and miles, till I came to a big town by the sea. There were lots of big ships at the docks, and I asked a man, with a great big beard, to take me too. So he took me on board, and I was a little cabin boy. But bye and bye I got to be a real sailor, and I sailed all over the world in the ship, and saw lots of people, yellow, and black, and brown, and funny places and queer houses and—”

“Be careful, Frank!”

They all turned at once. There was Mother, standing right near them. All the

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time she had been listening, near the Crying Tree.

“Now, Frank,” she repeated, “be careful or you’ll put notions in those children’s heads, and some day they’ll be running away from me .”

Still she didn’t look cross, and she smiled at the Toyman, especially when he answered:

“Not from a mother like you, Mis’ Green. How about it, kiddies?”

And Marmaduke and Jehosophat were very sure they never could run away—not even to sea in a beautiful ship. So they kissed her and hugged her too.

Now the froggies were singing their evening song. The sun was getting close to his home in the west. Little Duckie and his real mother and father came out of the water and waddled off towards the barn. The Swans folded their wings and came to the shore. So the Toyman brought the ship to the harbour and anchored her for the night.