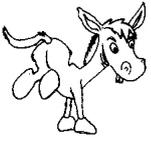


# Toby Saves the Day

By Shirley Young



**I**t was the end of the long summer holidays and Andrew Brown was bored and fidgety. He didn't know what to do with himself. As he slowly ambled along the lane leading to his house, he dragged his feet and idly kicked at small stones and bits of stick on the lane. It was then that he spied a box of matches lying on the grass verge.

Normally Andrew would not have bothered with matches, but because he had nothing better to do, he stopped and picked the box up. He fully expected it to be empty, but it wasn't. Inside were three unused matches.

Andrew's interest quickened. He glanced furtively up and down the lane to see if anyone was watching him, but when he saw that there was no one about, he struck one of the matches. It flared up quickly and almost burnt his fingers. Andrew dropped it hastily, stamping on it to make sure that it was not still alight.

Andrew's parents had told him that he should **never** play with matches and he knew it was a very dangerous thing to do. It could create a fire leading to loss of property or even loss of life! Andrew knew that he had just disobeyed his parents and it made him feel very guilty. So he thrust the box of matches into his pocket and hurried off up the road, fully intending to give the matches to his mother as soon as he got home. But when he ran up the driveway to his house, Mummy and his sister Hannah were just getting into the car.

"Oh there you are Andrew!" called Mummy. "I'm just taking Hannah into town to get something for her school uniform. We won't be gone very long. Why don't you go and play with Toby till we get back?"

Andrew nodded, but anxiously fingered the matches in his pocket. Then he blurted out, "Mummy, I've found . . . ." But he was too late. Mummy had

already started the engine of the car and didn't hear him. She backed the car out of the driveway, waving a hand to Andrew as she went.

Andrew turned and ran to the paddock, climbing up onto the top rail of the fence. "Toby! Toby!" he called.

When his pet donkey, Toby, heard the familiar voice calling his name, he pricked up his large ears and came galloping excitedly across the field. As he drew level with Andrew, who was still sitting on the fence, Toby tipped his big head sideways into the boy's lap waiting for him to scratch behind his ears. He loved that!

Andrew obligingly stroked the donkey absentmindedly, but his thoughts were still pre-occupied with the matches in his pocket.

After a while he jumped down from the fence and ran down the length of the vegetable garden. Toby trotted along, keeping pace with him on the other side of the fence. When Toby reached the end of the garden, he stopped and looked over the fence, watching to see what the boy would do.

At the far end of the long vegetable garden was a disused patch of ground where Mr Brown (Daddy) collected all the twigs and leaves ready for a bonfire. There was now a huge pile of rubbish waiting to be burnt. Two apple trees, with leaves that were beginning to turn brown and brittle, stood nearby.

Andrew crouched down and began to scoop together some of the leaves and twigs to make himself a miniature 'pretend' bonfire. Then he took the forbidden matches out of his pocket and stared at them. He finally decided to give into the temptation to use them and struck the second match. But the wind quickly blew out the flame.

Andrew guiltily fingered the last match, thinking hard. There wasn't much point in giving Mummy just one match, he reasoned (quite wrongly of course), so he struck the third and last match and held it to the little pile

of twigs. The twigs were very dry from the long hot summer and they immediately caught light and began to flare up.

As the smell of fire reached Toby's nostrils he gave a loud snort, kicked up his heels and then raced off down the paddock. He didn't like fire. It made him feel very afraid.

The small bonfire burnt fiercely and then gradually collapsed into a charred heap. It was still smouldering slightly when Andrew heard the sound of his mother's car turning into the driveway. Quickly, and with his heart racing, Andrew leapt onto the dying bonfire and began stamping it out with his feet. He then kicked the remaining embers and ashes back toward the big bonfire that daddy was building. Then he ran to greet his mother and sister.

That night, after everyone had gone to bed, the house lay dark and still as the family slept. Toby was fast asleep in the stable, lying on clean straw and gently snoring, when suddenly he woke up, his sense alert. He lifted his head and began to sniff the air. He could smell something burning! And then his acute ears heard a low crackling sound.

In a flash Toby scrambled to his feet and ran over to the stable door. It was a very warm night, and Daddy had left the top half of the stable door open and had only bolted the bottom part to keep Toby in. So Toby stuck his big head out over the stable door and sniffed the air again. Then he became aware of a red glow coming from the bottom end of the garden.

**FIRE!!!** Toby knew that he had to warn mummy and daddy, but how could he do that when he was stuck in the stable? Suddenly he remembered an old trick he had learned as a young donkey. He bent his head over the top of the lower stable door, grasped the iron bolt between his teeth, and with a quick sideways motion of his head caused the bolt to shoot back.

The door swung open and Toby raced out, galloping madly towards the back door of the house. "**Hee-haw!**" he cried at the top of his voice. He then reared up with his legs and began pounding at the door. The awful

noise soon woke up daddy, who jumped out of bed and turned on the light. Then he swung open the window above Toby and poked his head out.

"Is that you, Toby?" he called down into the darkness. "Be quiet! Everyone is asleep. Whatever is the matter with you? And HOW did you get out of your stable?"

Toby only continued "**hee-hawing**" even more loudly.

Realising that something must be dreadfully wrong for Toby to be acting this way, Daddy stopped scolding the donkey and looked around the garden from his upstairs window. It was then that he, too, saw the bright flare of light in the garden and knew what it was!

"It's OK Toby, I'm coming!" he yelled and slammed the window shut. As he grabbed his dressing gown and shoes, Mummy woke up. "What's going on?" she enquired, sitting up in bed.

"There's a fire! Quick, call the Fire Service. I'm going to see what I can do," said daddy hurriedly as he raced off down the stairs with a powerful torch in his hand.

Andrew had also been awakened by Toby's noise and he clattered down the stairs after his father. As they ran out into the garden, Daddy ordered, "Quick, Andrew, turn on that tap over there. I'll turn the garden hose onto the fire and try to contain it until the fire engine gets here."

With his heart pounding in his chest, Andrew ran to obey his father. Toby, who was frightened by the fire and all the commotion, ran back to his stable and kept out of the way.

Daddy sprinted to the end of the vegetable patch with the hose in his hand and saw that one of the big apple trees was already well alight and burning fiercely. The fire had also caught hold of the garden fence and was licking its way along it toward the house. Daddy quickly concentrated

the jet of water on the fence, desperately trying to keep the fire away from the house.

"The Fire Service are on their way!" called Mummy as she came running outside with a bucket of water. She was quickly followed by a very frightened Hannah, who wondered what was going on.

Five or six minutes later they heard the sound of the fire engine's siren blaring through the night. The fire truck hurtled down the lane and screeched to a halt in their driveway, its tyres hot. Soon the firemen were running about unravelling long hoses. Water jettted and poured out onto the flames, creating a great hissing noise. Gradually the fire was brought under control and went out. Smoke and steam still rose in the air as the firemen finished by carefully checking that every last spark had been extinguished.

When the firemen finally left, the Brown family looked about them. One of the apple trees had collapsed into a burnt heap, half the garden fence was gone, and a small garden shed stood blackened and charred. Water lay everywhere.

As the family stood quietly together, Daddy thanked God for sparing their house and lives, and then they all turned their backs on the garden and went into the house.

A little later, as they sat around the kitchen table drinking cups of hot chocolate, Daddy said, "I can't understand it! How could that fire have started? I suppose it must have been spontaneous combustion from the bonfire pile."

Mummy nodded thoughtfully, but Andrew, with guilt written all over his face, suddenly burst into tears and buried his head on his arms on the table. "It was my fault! It was all my fault!" he sobbed in a broken voice.

Mummy and Daddy glanced at each other significantly. Mummy placed a hand on Hannah's arm. "Come on," she said. "I think it's time I got you to bed," and she led the little girl from the room.

"All right then," said Daddy quietly to Andrew when Mummy and Hannah had left. "Now tell me the whole story."

So between sobs and gulps Andrew told his father exactly what had happened. He explained how he had found the matches and how he knew it was wrong to use them, but then mummy had gone to town before he could give them to her . . . and then, well, he just couldn't help trying them out on a little pretend bonfire. When he had finished speaking he glanced up nervously. His father's face was grim and stern.

"Andrew," he said, "You know you could have endangered the lives of the whole family?"

"Yes, daddy, I know," said Andrew miserably. "I knew I shouldn't play with matches and I will NEVER do it again! I'm SO sorry!" he said, as he burst into a fresh bout of tears.

Daddy hugged Andrew close to him and after Andrew's tears subsided said, "What happened tonight could have been much worse, but thanks to Toby it wasn't - and I can't tell you how proud I am of you for owning up and telling the truth."

When Andrew heard what his father said, he started crying again and a few minutes passed while his father comforted him. Then Daddy said, "This has been a terrible shock for you, but I know you are sorry about what happened, so I don't think there's any need to say anymore about it. However I do think it would be a good idea if you helped to pay for some of the new fence panels, don't you?" Andrew nodded as Daddy explained that he would be keeping back half of Andrew's pocket money for the next few months.

"OK Dad," sniffed Andrew, knowing that this was his father's way of teaching him the lesson about the importance of being obedient and grateful that his punishment (which he knew he deserved) was not worse.

They hugged each other for a few more minutes and then Daddy said in a soft voice, "Well now, I think there is someone who we ought to go and thank."

"God?" asked Andrew.

"Well, yes" agreed Daddy, "But we've already thanked Him for looking after us. I was thinking of someone else."

"Toby!" exclaimed Andrew.

"Yes, Toby," said his father. "If it hadn't been for him things could have been a lot worse, so we can be very thankful that Toby was there to **SAVE THE DAY!**"

*The End*

