

## THE TODDLER

By JAMES J. COLLINS

As a grandfather, I marvel at the tenacity of a toddler. My daughter has three little girls between one and four years old, so that it seems that a toddler crawls around the floor in our house continuously. They are a pleasure to behold. Nothing fazes them. The world becomes a vast playground and all things in it are to be poked, tasted, felt, dropped and otherwise roughed up. Nothing remains safe; all is fair game. To a toddler everything is a wonder and a challenge. They go where they are prohibited, and watch your reaction to their incursion into restricted territory. They tentatively reach out their hand to the forbidden item, if you are near, and boldly grab it, if you are not. Rejection to them becomes a temporary setback, a challenge, not an impregnable barrier. No, the more formidable the obstacle, the more they work at getting their way. They cannot talk, yet they communicate their demands, their frustrations and their tenacity.

Walking, a task we take for granted becomes, to them, a major undertaking. Moreover, it requires accomplishment under the most trying circumstances. Toddlers master skills of balance, and arm and leg coordination at the same time that they try to learn an unknown language. Yet they do this while grownups frustrate their every action.

A large pot becomes an interesting toy. Initially too big for little hands, it is awkward, but the toddler will not let go. The pot is banged, turned over, rolled on its side, filled and then emptied time after time until the grownup tires of the game, but not the toddler. When they get into the pots, toddlers play with them for hours, and the grownups let them, unless the child appears about to drop one on little head or foot. Remove the pot, and the child howls displeasure.

Jam once tasted brings a grin and leaves the memory of the wonderful taste, but after the child, smeared with jam from ear to ear, exceeds the parent's tolerance for dirt, the parent removes the jam, and cleans the little pouty face. This ablution, neither requested nor encouraged, frustrates the toddler who lets you know that at once. Yet the child never gives up. Again and again, the toddler attempts the impossible, and eventually, though tentative at

first, masters it. Not content to sit on accomplishments, the toddler looks for another challenge. They bring intelligence and invention to each self-appointed task, exploring things from differing vantage points. If the problem cannot be met head on, it yields to being crawled under, climbed over, or cut down. The toddler's answer becomes apparent; a solution exists for every puzzle, and they go to great lengths to win. Eventually they succeed. They master language, walking, sharing, eating by themselves, dressing themselves and the hundreds of things we take for granted. Moreover, they never look back. Toddlers are truly 'my little heroes'.

As I pondered the way of the toddler, the simile to writing became evident. To some authors, poetry becomes the jam of life and they revel in it. Once they taste it, they never obtain enough and they never forget where that forbidden fruit hides. They go back time after time to partake, and they howl when the critic says they are making a mess, frustrates their effort, and sends them away from their treat. To me the novel is the big pot, unwieldy, hard to handle, yet exciting and challenging. Editors and critics, the grownups who decide that our pastime is not desired, frustrate our efforts to play the way we wish. They become obstacles. To the critics, to rejection slips, to writers block, and the nay Sayers to each of them I throw down the gauntlet. You shall not win. You will not defeat me. For suddenly I realize that I am one of my own little heroes. In the world of writers, I am that most tenacious of all beings . . . I am a toddler.

**THE END**