

The Tale of Samuel Whiskers or The Roly-Poly Pudding

by Beatrix Potter adapted by EveryReader

Adapted to Lexile Level 800





Long ago there lived an older cat named Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit. She worried constantly about her kittens. They often wandered off, and whenever they did, they always made trouble.



One baking day, she decided to shut them in a cupboard to keep them safe. She caught Moppet and Mittens, but she could not find Tom.



Mrs. Tabitha searched up and down the whole house, mewing for Tom Kitten. She looked in the pantry under the stairs and in the best spare room, which was covered with dust sheets. She climbed to the attics and peered into every corner, but Tom was nowhere.



It was a very old house, full of cupboards and passageways. Some walls were four feet thick. Odd noises sometimes came from inside them, as if there might be a hidden stair. Things disappeared at night—especially cheese and bacon.



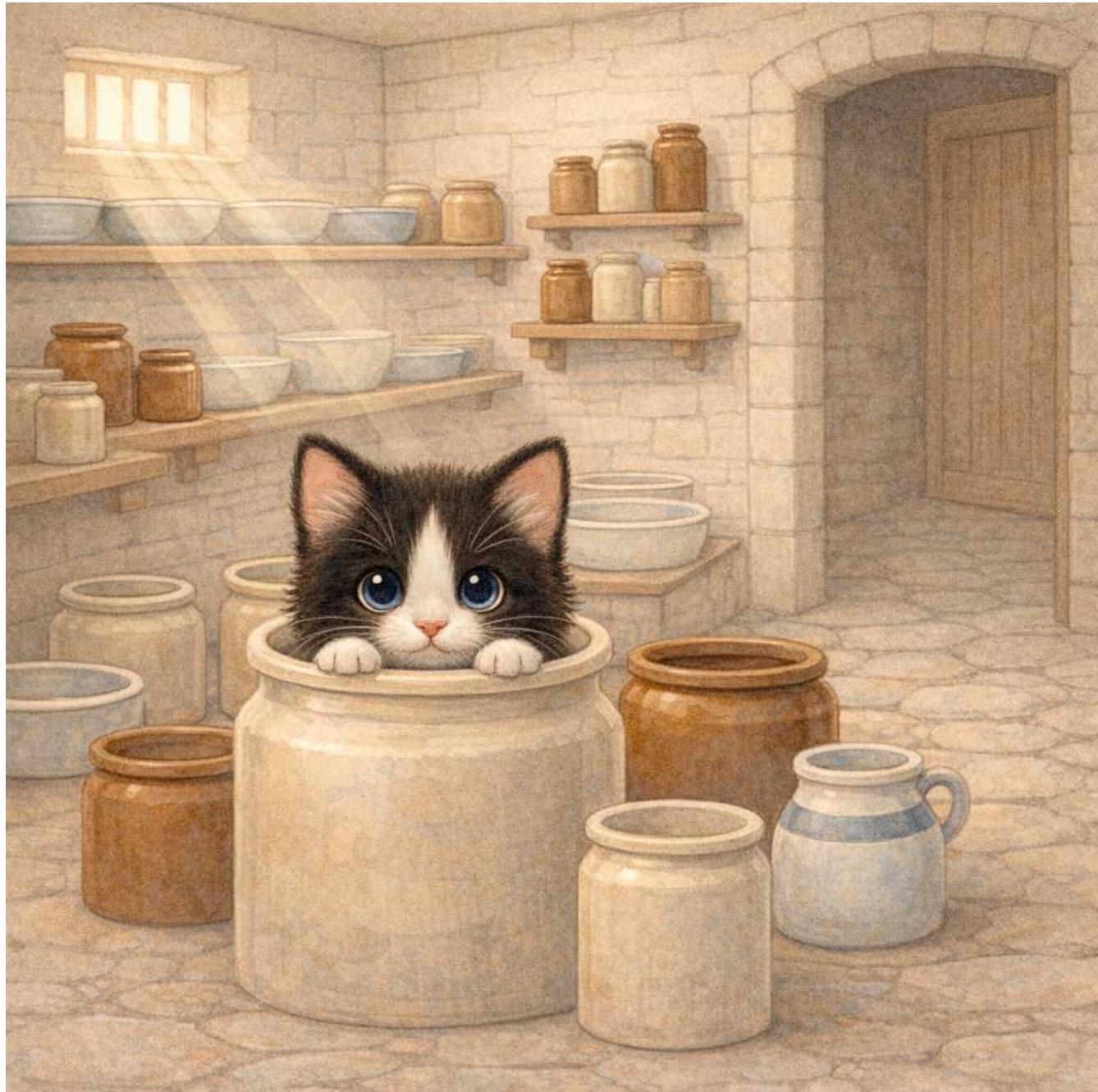
Mrs. Tabitha grew more upset and mewed loudly. While their mother searched the house, Moppet and Mittens got into mischief. The cupboard door wasn't locked, so they pushed it open and slipped out.



They went straight to the pan of dough rising before the fire. They patted it with their soft paws. "Shall we make little muffins?" Mittens asked Moppet.



Just then someone knocked at the front door, and Moppet leaped into the flour barrel in fright. Mittens ran to the dairy and hid inside an empty jar on the stone shelf where the milk pans stood.



The visitor was their neighbor, Ribby. She had come to borrow yeast. Mrs. Tabitha came downstairs, mewing in distress.



"Come in, Cousin Ribby, come in and sit down! I'm in terrible trouble, Cousin Ribby," said Tabitha, wiping tears with her apron. "I've lost my dear son Thomas. I'm afraid the rats have taken him."



"He is a naughty kitten, Cousin Tabitha. Last time I came to tea he used my best bonnet for a cat's cradle. Where have you looked for him?" asked Ribby. "All over the house! There are too many rats. Oh, what a burden an unruly family can be!" said Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit.



"I'm not afraid of rats," said Ribby. "I'll help you find him—and scold him too! What is all that soot in the fender?" "The chimney needs sweeping. Oh, dear me, Cousin Ribby—now Moppet and Mittens are gone!"



"They've both gotten out of the cupboard!" Ribby and Tabitha began a thorough search of the house again. They poked under beds with Ribby's umbrella and rummaged through cupboards.



They even brought a candle and looked inside a clothes chest in one attic. They found nothing, but once they heard a door bang and the sound of quick feet running downstairs. "Yes, this house is overrun with rats," said Tabitha, tearful.



"I caught seven young ones in one hole in the back kitchen, and we had them for dinner last Saturday." "And once I saw the old father rat—an enormous one, Cousin Ribby." "I was just about to jump on him when he showed his yellow teeth and whisked down a hole."



"The rats are wearing out my nerves, Cousin Ribby," said Tabitha. They searched and searched. They both heard a curious rolling, thumping sound under the attic floor, but they could see nothing.



They went back to the kitchen. "Here is one of your kittens at least," said Ribby, pulling Moppet out of the flour barrel. They brushed the flour off her and set her on the kitchen floor.



She trembled with fright. "Oh, Mother, Mother," cried Moppet, "there was an old woman rat in the kitchen, and she stole some of the dough!" The two cats ran to the dough pan.



There were tiny scratch marks, and a piece of dough was missing. "Which way did she go, Moppet?" But Moppet had been too frightened to look out of the barrel again.



Ribby and Tabitha took Moppet with them so they could keep her in sight as they continued searching. They went to the dairy. The first thing they found was Mittens, hiding in an empty jar.



They tipped up the jar, and she scrambled out. "Oh, Mother, Mother!" cried Mittens. "There was an old man rat in the dairy—a dreadful, enormous rat—and he stole a pat of butter and the rolling pin!"



Ribby and Tabitha stared at each other. "Butter and a rolling pin! Oh, my poor Thomas!" exclaimed Tabitha, wringing her paws. "A rolling pin?" said Ribby. "Didn't we hear a roly-poly noise in the attic when we looked in that chest?"



Ribby and Tabitha rushed upstairs again. The rolling noise was still going on under the attic floor. "This is serious, Cousin Tabitha," said Ribby. "We must send for John Joiner at once, with a saw."



This is what had happened to Tom Kitten, and it shows why it is unwise to climb up a chimney in an old house, especially when you don't know the way—and when there are huge rats. Tom Kitten did not want to be shut in a cupboard. When he saw his mother getting ready to bake, he decided to hide.



He looked for a place and chose the chimney. The fire had only just been lit, and it was not hot, but green sticks made white, choking smoke. Tom stepped onto the fireplace grate and looked up. It was a big, old-fashioned fireplace.



The chimney was wide enough for a man to stand and move around. There was plenty of room for a small kitten. He jumped up into the fireplace and balanced on the iron bar where the kettle hung.



Then he sprang from the bar to a ledge high inside the chimney, knocking down soot into the fireplace. Tom coughed and choked from the smoke. He heard the sticks beginning to crackle and burn below.



He decided to climb all the way to the top, get out onto the roof, and try to catch sparrows. "I can't go back," he thought. "If I slip, I might fall into the fire and singe my beautiful tail and my little blue jacket."



It was a very large, old chimney, built in the days when people burned logs on the hearth. The chimney stack rose above the roof like a small stone tower. Daylight shone down from the top, under the slanting roof slates that kept out the rain.



Tom grew very frightened. Still, he climbed up and up. He had to edge sideways through inches of soot. He looked like a little chimney sweep himself.



It was confusing in the dark. One narrow passage seemed to lead into another. There was less smoke now, but Tom felt truly lost.



He scrambled upward until he reached a place where someone had loosened a stone in the wall. Mutton bones lay there. "How strange," thought Tom. "Who has been gnawing bones up in the chimney?"



"I wish I had never come. And what is that smell?" "It's like mouse, only terribly strong. It makes me sneeze." He squeezed through the hole in the wall and crawled along a very tight passage with almost no light.



He felt his way for several yards. He was behind the skirting board of the attic. Suddenly he tumbled headfirst down a hole and landed on a heap of very dirty rags.



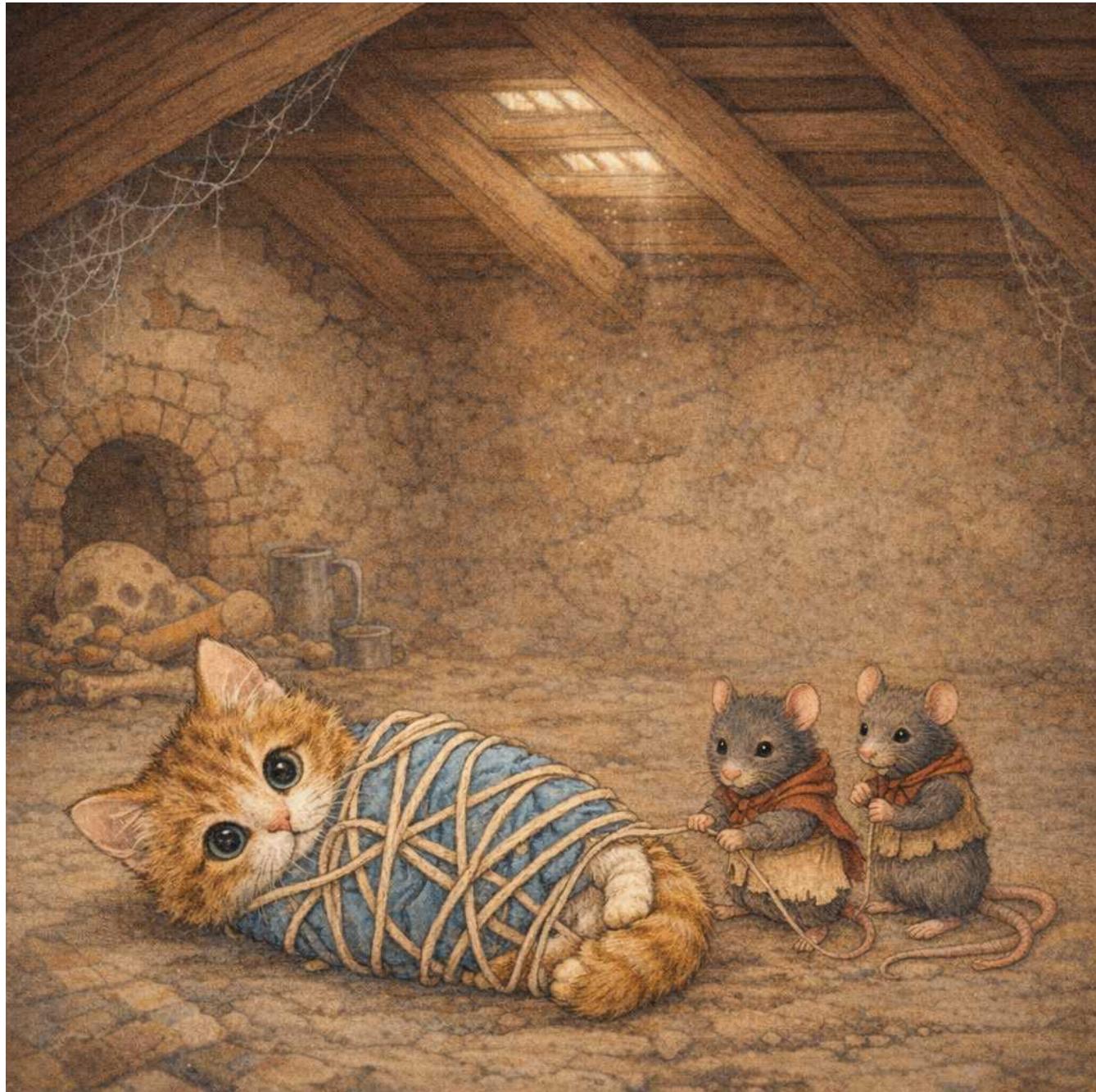
When he picked himself up and looked around, he saw a place he had never visited, even though he had lived in that house all his life. It was a tiny, stuffy room with boards, rafters, cobwebs, and rough plaster. Across from him, as far away as he could sit, was an enormous rat.



"What do you mean by falling into my bed all covered with soot?" the rat chattered. "Please, sir, the chimney needs sweeping," said poor Tom Kitten. "Anna Maria! Anna Maria!" squeaked the rat.



There was a patter of feet, and an old woman rat poked her head around a beam. In an instant she rushed at Tom. Before he knew what was happening, she pulled off his coat, rolled him up into a bundle, and tied him with string in very tight knots.



Anna Maria did the tying. The old rat watched and took a pinch of snuff. When she finished, they both sat and stared at Tom with their mouths open.



"Anna Maria," said the old rat, whose name was Samuel Whiskers, "make me a kitten dumpling, a roly-poly pudding, for my dinner." "It needs dough and a pat of butter and a rolling pin," said Anna Maria, tilting her head as she studied Tom. "No," said Samuel Whiskers. "Make it properly, with breadcrumbs."



"Nonsense. Butter and dough," said Anna Maria. They whispered together for a few minutes and then went away. Samuel Whiskers slipped through a hole in the wall paneling and boldly went down the front stairs to the dairy to get the butter.



He met no one. He made a second trip for the rolling pin, pushing it with his paws like a man rolling a barrel. He could hear Ribby and Tabitha talking, but they were busy lighting a candle to look into a chest. They did not see him.



Anna Maria went down along the skirting board and through a window shutter to the kitchen to steal the dough. She borrowed a small saucer and scooped up the dough with her paws. She did not notice Moppet.



Left alone under the attic floor, Tom tried to wriggle and meow for help. But his mouth was full of soot and cobwebs, and the knots were so tight that no one could hear him. Only a spider came out of a crack in the ceiling and examined the knots carefully from a safe distance.



It knew all about knots because it often tied up bluebottle flies. It did not offer to help. Tom wriggled and squirmed until he was completely exhausted.



Soon the rats returned and began to make him into a dumpling. First they smeared him with butter, then they rolled him in the dough. "Won't the string be very hard to digest, Anna Maria?" asked Samuel Whiskers.



Anna Maria said it did not matter, but she wished Tom would hold his head still because it spoiled the pastry. She grabbed his ears. Tom bit and spat and meowed and wriggled, and the rolling pin went roly-poly, roly; roly-poly, roly.



Each rat held an end. "His tail is sticking out! You didn't fetch enough dough, Anna Maria." "I brought as much as I could carry," she replied.



"I don't think," said Samuel Whiskers, pausing to look at Tom, "I do not think it will make a good pudding." "It smells of soot." Anna Maria was about to argue when new sounds began above—the rasping of a saw and the scratching and yelping of a small dog.



The rats dropped the rolling pin and listened. "We've been discovered, Anna Maria. Let's gather our belongings—and other people's—and leave at once." "I'm afraid we must give up this pudding."



"I am sure the knots would have been indigestible anyway, no matter what you say." "Come along and help me tie up some mutton bones in a bedspread," said Anna Maria. "I have half a smoked ham hidden in the chimney."



So when John Joiner had sawed up the plank, there was no one under the floor except the rolling pin and Tom Kitten inside a very dirty dumpling. There was a strong smell of rats, and John Joiner spent the rest of the morning sniffing, whining, wagging his tail, and circling with his head stuck in the hole like a drill.



Then he nailed the plank down again, put his tools in his bag, and came downstairs. The cat family had calmed down. They invited him to stay for dinner.



They had peeled the dough off Tom and made it into a separate bag pudding with currants to hide the soot. They had to give Tom a hot bath to wash off the butter. John Joiner sniffed the pudding, but he was sorry he couldn't stay.



He had just finished making a wheelbarrow for Miss Potter, and she had ordered two hen coops. Late in the afternoon, as I walked to the post, I looked up the lane and saw Mr. Samuel Whiskers and his wife running along with big bundles on a small wheelbarrow that looked very much like mine.



They were just turning in at the gate to Farmer Potatoes's barn. Samuel Whiskers was puffing and out of breath. Anna Maria was still arguing in a sharp voice.



She seemed to know exactly where she was going, and she had a great deal of luggage. I am quite sure I never gave her permission to borrow my wheelbarrow! They went into the barn and hauled their bundles with a string to the top of the hayloft.



After that, there were no more rats at Tabitha Twitchit's for a long time. But Farmer Potatoes was nearly driven out of his wits. There were rats and more rats in his barn!



They ate the chicken feed, stole the oats and bran, and gnawed holes in the meal bags. They were all descendants of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Whiskers—children, grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren. There seemed to be no end to them.



Moppet and Mittens grew into very good rat-catchers. They hunted rats around the village and found plenty of work. They charged by the dozen and earned a comfortable living.



They hung the rats' tails in a row on the barn door to show how many they had caught—dozens and dozens. But Tom Kitten has always been afraid of rats. He never dares to face anything bigger than a mouse.