The Tale of Samuel Whiskers, or The Roly-Poly Pudding

Beatrix Potter · *1908 · English original, Project Gutenberg #572*

Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit is an anxious parent in a very old house, full of cupboards, thick walls, and rats. On baking day she cannot find Tom Kitten, who has gone up the chimney. Under the attic floor, Samuel Whiskers and Anna Maria butter him and roll him in stolen dough for a kitten dumpling roly-poly pudding. John Joiner comes with a saw. The rats depart with other people's property; Tom is found in a very dirty dumpling.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What becomes of a kitten who will not stay in the cupboard, in a house where the rats are too many?

"it shows how very unwise it is to go up a chimney in a very old house, where a person does not know his way, and where there are enormous rats."
The chimney

Tom hides from baking-day confinement and climbs the wide old chimney, only to drop into the rats' quarters. Anna Maria ties him; Samuel Whiskers orders a dumpling. They steal dough, butter, and a rolling pin from the kitchen while Tabitha and Cousin Ribby search. The roly-poly noise under the attic floor leads them to send for John Joiner. The rats leave the pudding and flee to Farmer Potatoes's barn, where their descendants have no end. Moppet and Mittens grow up into very good rat-catchers. Tom has always been afraid of a rat.

KEY CHARACTERS

Tom Kitten
the unwise climber, later peeled out of a dirty dumpling, and always afraid of a rat

Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit
an anxious parent in a house infested with rats

Moppet and Mittens
his sisters, first in mischief, later very good rat-catchers

Samuel Whiskers and Anna Maria
the enormous old father rat and his wife, makers of the pudding

Cousin Ribby and John Joiner
the neighbor who hears the roly-poly noise, and the joiner sent for with a saw

Grades K–2
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01
An Anxious Parent
BAKING DAY

Kittens lost continually, and always in mischief.

- Once upon a time there was an old cat, called Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit, who was an anxious parent. She used to lose her kittens continually, and whenever they were lost they were always in mischief!
- On baking day she determined to shut them up in a cupboard. She caught Moppet and Mittens, but she could not find Tom. It was an old, old house, full of cupboards and passages. Some of the walls were four feet thick, and things disappeared at night—especially cheese and bacon.
- While she searched, Moppet and Mittens pushed open the unlocked cupboard and went straight to the dough set to rise before the fire. "Shall we make dear little muffins?" A knock at the door: Moppet jumped into the flour barrel; Mittens hid in an empty jar in the dairy.

02
Cousin Ribby Calls
THE SEARCH

Yeast, soot in the fender, and a roly-poly noise.

- The visitor was a neighbor, Mrs. Ribby, come to borrow some yeast. "I've lost my dear son Thomas; I'm afraid the rats have got him." Ribby is not afraid of rats, and will help to find him—and whip him, too. "What is all that soot in the fender?" "The chimney wants sweeping."
- They poke under beds with Ribby's umbrella and rummage cupboards. Tabitha has caught seven young rats out of one hole, and once saw the old father rat, who showed his yellow teeth. "The rats get upon my nerves, Cousin Ribby."
- They both heard a curious roly-poly noise under the attic floor. But there was nothing to be seen. In the kitchen they drag Moppet from the flour barrel: an old woman rat has stolen some of the dough. In the dairy, Mittens reports an enormous old man rat who has stolen a pat of butter and the rolling pin. "This is serious, Cousin Tabitha," said Ribby. "We must send for John Joiner at once, with a saw."

03
Up the Chimney
TOM'S WAY

A wide old stack, and a drop into other people's rooms.

- Now, this is what had been happening to Tom Kitten, and it shows how very unwise it is to go up a chimney in a very old house, where a person does not know his way, and where there are enormous rats.
- Tom did not want to be shut up in a cupboard. When he saw that his mother was going to bake, he determined to hide, and fixed upon the chimney. The fire had only just been lighted; there was a white choky smoke from the green sticks. The chimney was wide enough inside for a man to stand up and walk about. He jumped from the fender to the kettle-bar, then to a ledge, knocking soot into the fender.
- He made up his mind to climb right to the top and try to catch sparrows; he could not go back, for fear of falling in the fire. Before he reached the chimney top he came to a loosened stone, and mutton bones lying about, and a smell like mouse, only dreadfully strong. He squeezed through into a tight passage, then fell head over heels, down a hole, and landed on a heap of very dirty rags—in a small stuffy room he had never seen, though he had lived all his life in the house. Opposite him sat an enormous rat.

> *"it shows how very unwise it is to go up a chimney in a very old house, where a person does not know his way, and where there are enormous rats."*
> The chimney

04
A Kitten Dumpling
UNDER THE FLOOR

Butter, dough, a rolling pin, and a sooty smell.

- "Please, sir, the chimney wants sweeping," said poor Tom Kitten. "Anna Maria! Anna Maria!" Before he knew what was happening he was rolled up in a bundle and tied. Anna Maria did the tying.
- "Anna Maria, make me a kitten dumpling roly-poly pudding for my dinner." She considers dough, a pat of butter, and a rolling pin. Samuel Whiskers gets through a hole with the rolling pin; Anna Maria goes down by way of the kitchen to steal the dough.
- First they smeared him with butter, and then they rolled him in the dough. "Will not the string be very indigestible, Anna Maria?" She thought that of no consequence, but wished he would hold his head still. "His tail is sticking out! You did not fetch enough dough." Samuel pauses: "I do NOT think it will be a good pudding. It smells sooty."

05
John Joiner's Saw
THE CLOSE

The rats depart; Tom is peeled; Farmer Potatoes is overrun.

- All at once there began to be other sounds up above—the rasping noise of a saw, and the noise of a little dog, scratching and yelping. "We are discovered and interrupted, Anna Maria; let us collect our property—and other people's—and depart at once." They leave the pudding, and tie up mutton bones and a hidden half ham.
- By the time John Joiner had got the plank up, there was nobody under the floor except the rolling pin and Tom Kitten in a very dirty dumpling. The dumpling was peeled off and made separately into a bag pudding, with currants in it to hide the smuts. They had been obliged to put Tom Kitten into a hot bath to get the butter off.
- Late in the afternoon the narrator saw Mr. Samuel Whiskers and his wife on the run, with big bundles on a little wheelbarrow very much like her own, turning in at the gate to the barn of Farmer Potatoes. After that, there were no more rats for a long time at Tabitha Twitchit's—and no end of them at the farm. Moppet and Mittens have grown up into very good rat-catchers. But Tom Kitten has always been afraid of a rat; he never durst face anything that is bigger than—A Mouse.

Disobedience · Danger in the House · Rescue · Thieves · Consequences

What to watch for as you read

GRADES K–2

1. The book is also called The Roly-Poly Pudding, and is written in remembrance of "Sammy," an accomplished thief. The comedy of the rolling pin is real; so is the danger to Tom.
2. Potter tells you, before she shows the climb, that it is very unwise to go up a chimney in a very old house. The moral is given as a storyteller's aside, then proved.
3. The stolen dough, butter, and rolling pin are heard downstairs before they are explained upstairs. Watch how the kitchen clues and the attic noise become one pudding.
4. The rats are not killed. They move to Farmer Potatoes, and there is no end to them. The sisters earn a living catching rats; Tom's fear is left standing, like the last word—"A Mouse."

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