

The Tales of Beatrix Potter

15: The Tale of Mr Tod – Part 1

adapted by Jeff Capel

Mr Tod was a Fox and not a very popular one. No one liked him. Especially the rabbits. They didn't like his strong foxy smell or his habit of wandering around the countryside, one day living in a stick house in the wood or another in a house by the lake where he frightened the ducks. Mr Tod had lots of homes and the problem was that you never knew where he'd appear next.

Tommy Brock the Badger didn't like Mr Tod either. But then Mr Tod didn't like Tommy Brock.

The badger had a habit of letting himself into any one of Mr Tod's houses when he wasn't at home and going to sleep in his bed with dirty clothes and muddy boots on.

Tommy Brock was short and stout with a big grin and he waddled about digging things up to eat. He liked wasps' nests and frogs and juicy worms, but every now and then he craved rabbit pie made from the smallest, tastiest baby rabbits. And he happened to know that Benjamin Bunny and his wife Flopsy had recently added to their family with seven new babies.

One sunny afternoon he set off with a sack to visit them. The babies' grandpa, Old Mr Bouncer, was looking after them and so, when Tommy Brock arrived at the burrow, he started to chat to the old rabbit.

'I'm so hungry,' he said. 'I have not had a decent meal in two weeks. If this carries on I think I might have to eat my own tail!'

Old Mr Bouncer laughed at that and said: 'Come inside for a slice of seedcake and a glass of cowslip wine. That'll make you feel better.'

Tommy Brock squeezed himself into the rabbit burrow and sat down.

Now I don't know how much cowslip wine Old Mr Bouncer drank that afternoon, but at some point he must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew Benjamin and Flopsy had returned home. There was no sign of Tommy Brock and all the baby rabbits had disappeared. But there were badger footprints leading into the wood and so Benjamin Bunny set off at once to find his children.

He followed the tracks through the mud, across a little stream, over a stone wall and into a meadow where lots of other rabbits were enjoying dandelions in the late afternoon sun.

Benjamin recognised one in a blue coat, his cousin, Peter Rabbit.

'Peter! Peter Rabbit!' he shouted.

'Whatever is the matter, cousin Benjamin?' said Peter.

'Tommy Brock has taken my babies away in a sack. Have you seen him?'

'Yes,' replied Peter. 'Only ten minutes ago. He passed through with his sack. There was a lot of movement in it but he told me they were caterpillars.'



'Which way did he go?' asked Benjamin urgently.

'Towards Mr Tod's home in the wood at Bull Banks.'

'Come with me, quickly,' said Benjamin. 'He'll have started cooking.'

The two rabbits crept cautiously through the trees to Mr Tod's home where rocks and bushes overhung a bank. It looked like a cave and a prison and a run-down pigsty all in one.

The door was locked but when the rabbits peeped through the window they could see that the fire had not been lit. Tommy Brock had not started cooking his dinner.

Benjamin sighed with relief but there were things on the kitchen table that made him shudder. An empty pie dish and a large knife and fork. A plate, a glass, salt, pepper, mustard. In short, all the preparations for one person's supper.

'Oh my poor rabbit babies,' said Benjamin. 'What a dreadful place. I shall never seem them again!'

They scrambled around the rocks to the other side of the house where it was overgrown with thorny brambles.

They crept to the bedroom window. The room was dark and at first they couldn't see anything at all. But they heard a noise: slow and deep snoring and grunting. Tommy Brock was asleep in Mr Tod's bed.

It was night-time now and an owl began to hoot in the wood. The light of the moon twinkled on the pie dish and on the knife and fork. But it also shone on something else. A little iron door on a brick oven with a small glass window, which rattled and shook because something or some-things were inside.

Benjamin Bunny's babies! But how to rescue them? Benjamin and Peter could not open the window nor the strong, heavy door. There was only one way in - through the floor - and that meant digging a tunnel.

Rabbits are very good diggers but Benjamin and Peter had to dig and dig for hours. They could not tunnel in a straight line because of the rocks and stones.

All through the night they wore down their claws with digging and by sunrise they were under Mr Tod's kitchen floor.

Then they heard it. The unmistakeable angry yelping bark of a fox. Mr Tod was heading home and he was in a very bad mood after an extremely poor night's hunting. Mr Tod was in the worst of tempers and he was hungry.

Peter and Benjamin hid in the tunnel under the kitchen floor. The baby rabbits kicked and squirmed behind the oven door. And Tommy Brock carried on snoring in Mr Tod's bed.