

The Cottage Tales of Beatrix Potter
THE TALE OF HAWTHORN HOUSE

By Susan Wittig Albert

The most wonderful and the strongest things in the world, you know, are just the things which no one can see. There is life in you; and it is the life in you which makes you grow, and move, and think: and yet you can't see it. And there is steam in a steam-engine; and that is what makes it move: and yet you can't see it; and there may be fairies in the world, and they may be just what makes the world go round to the old tune of

C'est l'amour, l'amour, l'amour

Qui fait la monde à la ronde:

and yet no one may be able to see them except those whose hearts are going round to that same tune. At all events, we will make believe that there are fairies in the world. It will not be the last time by many a one that we shall have to make believe. And yet, after all, there is no need for that. There must be fairies; for this is a fairy-tale: and how can one have a fairy-tale if there are no fairies?

The Water Babies

Charles Kingsley, 1863

PROLOGUE

Hawthorn House
Thursday, 20 August, 1908

From the very beginning, Emily had been uneasy at Hawthorn House.

Granted, she was an imaginative girl whose fancies sometimes ran away with her common sense. But her feelings about Hawthorn House went beyond fancy—or so it seemed to Emily. The house was secretive, as if it were keeping a great many things to itself, things that ought to be revealed. It sat on the side of a hill overlooking the lake, but not proudly, the way a hillside house ought to sit. Instead, it seemed hunched and huddled, as if it were too preoccupied with troubling interior matters to look out across the lake.

Or perhaps it was merely that Hawthorn House did not want anybody to look at it. It was, after all, very ugly. The walls came together at the wrong angles, the slate roof was studded with towers and turrets and chimney pots and gables, the windows were in all the wrong places, and the garden was overgrown with nettle and thistle. No one had lived in Hawthorn House in years and years, for one very simple reason.

It was haunted.

Oh, not in the usual way. No long-dead ladies dressed in white, or headless monks or bearded gentlemen with no arms. It was worse than that—oh, much, much worse. Hawthorn House was haunted by dead dreams. It had been cursed by its evicted tenants, who vowed that the house would never again—

But we'll come to that later. The baby is crying, and we must get on with our story.

In fact, Baby Flora (who was generally quiet and well-behaved, for one so young) had been crying steadily in her cradle for the past hour, ever since Mrs. Graham had brought her back. It was now one in the afternoon, and not even her bottle had brought her any comfort.

And Emily—who was pacing up and down the kitchen, biting her lip and wringing her hands—was crying, too, mostly in sympathy with Baby Flora, but also in vexation and disappointment. At this very hour, she should have been at Windermere Station, boarding the afternoon train for London, where Miss Keller was waiting. Instead, she was marooned here at Hawthorn House, which (even if nothing had gone wrong) would have been a very unpleasant prospect, for the place was gloomy and isolated and ugly. And haunted.

Emily shivered at the word, pushing it away, out of her mind. The situation was bad enough without thinking about that, for everything *had* gone wrong. She was here by herself, with no hope at all of getting away. At the thought, the tears came even more freely—tears, it must be admitted, of self-pity.

Now, before you think too ill of our Emily, I must tell you that she believed little Flora to be the dearest thing imaginable. While Emily was waiting for her to be born, she had knitted baby caps in baby colors: pink for a girl, blue for a boy, yellow for both. She had been the first to cradle the newborn in her arms, to kiss the corner of her sweet rosebud mouth and whisper a

welcome into her tiny pink ear. She had slept beside Flora's cradle and got up in the night when Flora fretted. And in fortnight since the baby's birth, she had willingly learnt all sorts of new and necessary motherings, from changing baby's nappies to administering bottle and bath.

But I must also tell you that Emily was scarcely sixteen and still a girl, for all that she had the form and face of a young woman. And even though she had understood what she was letting herself in for (as much as one can be said to understand a new situation before one finds oneself in it up to one's pretty chin), Emily's romantic mind had painted the prospective experience in unmistakably rosy hues. But she had made mistakes, some of them quite regrettable.

For one thing, she had trusted the gypsy lad to whom she had given her heart when she met him at market some months before. But he did not love her as faithfully as he had promised. He had gone to the south of England to work in the hops fields without a goodbye and she had not had a letter from him since, not even so much as a ha'penny postcard.

And for another, she had trusted Mrs. Graham, who had agreed to take the baby when Miss Keller returned to London, so that Emily could follow. Emily would much rather have taken Flora with her, of course, but Miss Keller said that was out of the question. So Emily had no choice, and really, when you stopped to think of it, Flora would be happier growing up in the country, rather than the city. But London—well, London was Emily's dearest dream. London, and the blue velvet dress that Miss Keller had mentioned, and the smart blue boots that would go with the dress, and the white fur muff. Oh, such joy!

But Mrs. Graham had let her down, just like the gypsy lad. The City seemed as far away as the moon, and the dress, boots, and muff might as well be on Mars. Emily felt terribly betrayed, as you would too, I daresay, if you had your heart set on going to London and learnt, at the very last minute, that you could not go.

So I'm sure you can understand why Emily was crying. Miss Keller had already left for London, and was expecting her. Mrs. Hawker, the cook, had gone away, too, to take care of her sister. Mrs. Hawker was deaf as a doorpost and could not be counted on for ordinary conversation, but at least she had been another presence in the house. Deirdre Malone hadn't dropped in lately, either. Deirdre was too young to be a true confidante, but she had been a willing listener, even if Emily couldn't tell her the whole truth.

Emily could scarcely blame her employer for the way things had turned out. All the arrangements had been completed before Flora's birth, and Miss Keller had left believing everything satisfactorily settled. Mrs. Graham, the midwife, had undertaken to foster the child: the best of possible outcomes, Emily agreed—although sadly, as I said before, because she truly wanted to take the baby with them. The Grahams already had three little girls of their own, and Mr. Graham's earnings as a lorry driver provided a comfortable cottage, two good milk cows, and three pigs. Little Flora would grow up happily there, a prospect that had reconciled Emily to the pain of giving her up.

But it was Mr. Graham who had thrown the spanner into the works. When he learnt that the baby was another girl, he flatly refused to have her. "'Tis boys we wants," he had said to his wife. "Give us a boy and you can keep 'im. But doan't give us nae more worthless girls."

So Mrs. Graham had brought little Flora back to Hawthorn House just as Emily was ready to leave, and now the baby wouldn't stop crying, and Emily had got to her wits' end, which, according to her former employer, was not be very far.

"You are a silly girl," Lady Longford had scolded whenever Emily had committed some minor infraction of a Tidmarsh Manor rule. "A foolish, spoiled girl with no more brains than a halfpenny bun, and wretchedly conceited into the bargain."

Of course, we can't permit Lady Longford to have the last word on Emily, but it is certainly true that the girl was thinking less about Baby Flora and more of her own disappointments: of her portmanteau packed and ready, of the train ticket Miss Keller had bought her, of the shilling for the hansom cab she was to hire when she arrived in London. She wrung her

hands and fresh, hot tears pooled in her eyes and ran down her cheeks. Miss Keller was expecting her, and she must go to London, she really must!

But how, now that Mr. Graham had sent Flora back? Take the infant with her on the train? That might be the only alternative. But Miss Keller had made it very clear that their life in London would not permit her to care for an infant and—

BANG!

The kitchen door flew violently open and a woman stepped inside, although it might be more accurate to say that she *blew* in on a gust of sudden wind that lifted her bodily over the threshold and deposited her in the middle of the kitchen, her clothing tossed and tumbled and twisted about her. This was curious, since the August day had, up to that moment, been sultry and very, very still, without the slightest whisper of wind, and since country people never, ever came into a kitchen without pausing at the door to knock and yoo-hoo.

Emily stared, shocked into open-mouthed silence, as her visitor shook herself. She was shorter than Emily by a full head, and roundly plump, with untidy gray hair and soft features, like a sweet-faced cloth doll. But her expression was as keen as a knife, her chin was firm, and her blue eyes piercing. Despite the warmth of the summer's day, she was dressed in a rag-bag jumble of bright plaid and paisley woolen scarves and knitted shawls, with layers of pinafores, some white, some yellow, some printed with flowers and decorated with rows and rows of buttons, on top of a bright red petticoat. Peeking out from under her petticoat were a pair of pair of heavy wood-and-leather pattens, and on her arm hung an old-fashioned woven reed basket covered with a blue-checked cloth.

"Who—" Emily faltered.

"You might call me Mrs. Overthwall," the woman said cheerfully, "but then again you might not." Her voice was creaky, like a hinge that wants oiling. She set down her basket and unwound a paisley scarf, then a plaid one, then one all over green. "I've come to visit."

"Very kind, I'm sure," Emily said, in a formal tone, "but Miss Keller is away and—"

"Flora is crying." Mrs. Overthwall pulled her scant gray eyebrows together in a stern frown. "She has been crying for several hours. Sev-er-al," she repeated with forbidding emphasis.

"I'm afraid so," Emily said guiltily, so taken aback that she did not think to ask how Mrs. Overthwall knew the baby's name. "She has been . . . well, cross. I was just going up to see to her."

"Allow me," Mrs. Overthwall said, and went toward the stairs, still carrying her basket.

Alarmed, Emily put out her hand. "Oh, no, really, please! Don't trouble yourself!" But Mrs. Overthwall paid no attention, and Emily's eyes grew round as she watched the woman go up the stairs—not walking, not running, but *twinkling* smoothly and gracefully, which was all the odder because it is virtually impossible to twinkle in wood-and-leather pattens, as you will know if you have ever worn them. They are something like the Dutch wooden shoes, except that the tops are leather. You are far more likely to *clomp* than *twinkle*.

And then, before Emily could draw in another breath, Mrs. Overthwall was twinkling down the stairs again.

"The matter is taken care of," she announced with a calm authority. "You have missed today's train, my dear Emily. But the next one leaves at nine o'clock in the morning. You shall be in London by tea-time."

Emily stared, an uncomfortably insistent idea elbowing itself into her reluctant awareness.

"Are you a—" She bit her lip. She could not bring herself to say the word.

"Don't be impertinent," said Mrs. Overthwall, in a tone remarkably like that of Lady Longford. "I advise you to take the earliest ferry, so as to be at the station on time."

Emily gulped. "But I . . . but you can't possibly . . ."

“Of course I can,” said Mrs. Overthewall, with extraordinary firmness. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed Emily on the forehead. Her voice softened. “And so can you, my child. And so you must, and that’s an end to it. Now, I’m off.”

And exactly as if it had been waiting on her word, the door flew open, slamming so violently against the wall that the dishes danced. The wind hurtled in and gathered up Mrs. Overthewall, twirling her twice so that her shawl and mufflers wrapped themselves firmly around her and her basket. And then it whirled her out the door and slammed it shut behind her.

Emily stared at the closed door, her heart thudding in her chest. She turned and ran as fast as she could up the stairs to Flora’s cradle. It was empty.

Now half sick with fright, Emily ran to the window and flung it open. The nettles along the garden path were bent nearly double by the wild wind, and the neglected roses flung their petals into the blustery air. Mrs. Overthewall twinkled swiftly over the gravel, her mufflers and shawls and pinafores and petticoats swirling about her in a kaleidoscope of magical colors. When she reached the stone wall at the back of the garden, she rose to the top, where she turned, looked up at Emily, and blew her a kiss.

“Don’t worry,” she called. “And don’t miss your train, dear girl!” And with that, she flew off the wall and was gone.

Emily blinked, closed her eyes, and looked again. Of course, it might have been a trick of the light or cloud or wind or an overwrought imagination. But even though she could plainly see the stile and the stone fence and the hillside beyond, Mrs. Overthewall was nowhere in sight.

She and her basket and Baby Flora had utterly vanished.