

DOROTHY ELLEN SHAIL

Dorothy Ellen Shail (1892 - 1965), variously referred to in the Howard family as 'The Old Nurse', 'Nursie', 'Old Puss', 'Twitchit', 'Ribby' or 'Rib' (after the cats Twitchit and Mrs. Ribby featured in several of the Beatrix Potter Tales), was initially employed by Dr. and Mrs. Dashwood-Howard as a nurse for their then two children, Ula Pegatha and Arthur Maltravers (Jo), and later for Nona Nivea. 'Ribby' was actually a tailoress and came to the Dashwood-Howard family because she was not happy in her tailoring job.

She joined the family in 1913 when she was 21 years of age. Ula Pegatha describes her as follows in her hand-written notes *Childhood Remembered - 1909 Onwards*, now in the compilers collections:

"I always remember the first day Nursie - Dorothy Shail [Dorothy Ellen Shail] - came to us [at 'The Corner', Hampton Hill]. Jo was two years old and I was four. She was so pretty, very tall and dark with rosy cheeks and was wearing a hat that I have never forgotten. It was dark grey or black and had fairly wide lace all round the rim.

"Jo and I used to love visiting Nursie's home and being with her Mum [Ellen Louisa, née Harber] and Dad [Albert Shail]. They were always 'Mum' and 'Dad' to us, and we sometimes, when Father and Mother were away, stayed in their terrace house. 'Mum' was just like a cottage loaf - a round body and round rosy smiling face, sparkling blue eyes, and her hair dressed like a small cottage loaf. 'Dad' was a fireman and from time to time we were taken to see the lovely red and brass fire engine and the brass helmets the firemen then wore.

"Nursie had two sisters, Edith [Edith May], who was the elder and during World War I delivered milk in one of those little carts with a brass milk churn which had a tap, and Ethel [Ethel Kathleen], the youngest of the family, who worked at Humphrey's butchers shop.

"Two of Nursie's brothers were at the Front during the War. Ted [Edward Albert Shail] the eldest, sent us lovely embroidered cards from time to time. I think he was in the Coldstream Guards [he was, becoming a Sergeant and, later, in the Royal Engineers, a Captain]. Ernest [Ernest George Shail] the younger brother lost a leg at Ypres. He came home and worked at the Star and Garter Hospital at Richmond. He came to Ludham for many years at holiday time to do odd jobs in decorating etc. as this was his trade before the War. He was a real cockney and full of fun"

'Ribby' has been included in this work because she was such a wonderful person and much loved by Arthur and Melita Dashwood-Howard's children and grandchildren. She dedicated her whole life to the Dashwood-Howard family and remained with Melita as a nurse and companion at 'The Mowle' until the latter's death in 1959. The family then purchased a flat for her in Station Lane, Hornchurch, Essex, the town in which 'Jo' and Nona lived with their families, so that she could go into retirement without being too much alone, a fitting reward for her 45 years of faithful service. Dear 'Ribby' died at the age of 73 in 1965.

The compiler recalls:

'Ribby' was always an important part of our lives during holidays at Ludham. She was a very large person with a voice, the volume of which matched her size. She liked to pretend she was very strict with us children if we did not behave properly but she had a heart of gold and the patience of Job, and never reported any of our misdemeanors to Grandmother. If we had any worries, 'Ribby' was always there to listen and give her cheerful advice. Cheerful she was indeed, always laughing, and possessed of a great sense of humour.

She had a small room at 'The Mowle', opposite Grandmother's bedroom, next to a very, very steep and narrow curving stairway which led from the kitchen. How she managed those stairs, particularly with a tray of food in her hands for Grandmother when the latter was ill, remains a complete mystery to me! According to Ula and Jo she was not allowed to use the much wider and less steep front stairs but their younger sister remarks that she preferred to use the back stairs as they were nearer to Grandmother's bedroom. Ribby was a wonderful cook and we were all thoroughly spoilt by her, particularly at Christmas.

She suffered from arthritis in later years and when getting out of a car, which generally took some time and a great deal of physical effort, she would say, "Let me get my leg straight" before she started to pull herself up with the aid of her walking stick. That expression is perpetuated in the family to this day!



'RIBBY'



**WITH NONA NIVEA
DASHWOOD-HOWARD**

Ribby's father, Albert Shail, was described in the 1901 census as an Inspector of Nuisances, aged 34, living with his family at 2 Lorne Villas, High Street, Hampton Hill, Middlesex. He married Ellen Louisa Harber in 1890 at Richmond. They had six children, Edward Albert, Dorothy Ellen, Edith May, Ernest George, Godfrey Herbert and Ethel Kathleen. Dorothy Ellen (Ribby) was born 13 November 1902.

The compiler's elder cousin, Robin Maurice Dashwood Wright, recalls:

"My first impression is of a mountain of a lady; kind, warm, firm - strict if necessary, yet always fair. She always seemed to wear voluminous dark blue dresses with white spots [see left-hand photo above!] and sandals the size of boats.

"She was known by Grandmother and the rest of the family as 'Twitchit' or 'Rib' and remained a true and faithful companion for the whole of her life. She had a brother named Rudolph [actually Ernest] who had lost a leg in World War I, and I can remember him sitting, wooden leg outstretched, in the nursery at 'The Mowle'.

"She was an excellent chef and I have mouth-watering memories of marvellous Christmas dinners after you and I were replete with wonderful presents.

"Given to extreme tantrums (only controlled by Aunt Rat [Nona Nivea Green, née Dashwood-Howard] and enticed from under the table), I was once taken by 'Nursie' to her tiny room at the top of the Mowle's back stairs (now Aunt Rat's bathroom). 'Nursie' showed me a hair brush on the tortoiseshell back of which adhered something which she claimed was the skin of a naughty child who had received a beating. Must have made an impression as I still have a vivid memory of this. 'Nursie' also conjured up a 'Mr Pierce' who would apparently knock on the front door whenever I was naughty and threaten to take me away to a place where all naughty children go (Berlin, Washington, Baghdad?)

"But overall my memories of 'Nursie' are fond".

The compiler's younger cousin, Nivea Ann Green, recalls:

"You could get away with being dirty as long as it was clean dirt, but if it was dirty dirt you would be in trouble. In other words if you hadn't washed properly there was trouble!"