

FIVE
CHILDREN
AND
IT

Edith Nesbit



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INTRODUCTION

Be careful what you wish for. That is the theme of this wonderful children's classic.

The “it” in the title of *Five Children and It* refers to the Psammead, a magical creature that the children dig up at the beach while on vacation. It turns out that it can give them wishes—but unfortunately, the Psammead is very exact in how it answers a wish—and magical wishes are never as straightforward as they seem. Thus, through the power of unintended consequences, mistakes, and bad luck, the children spoil a series of wonderful wishes. (They even meet a warlike American Indian, which I'm sure was quite exotic for the Victorians of Nesbit's era.)

This story has a lot of magic, but Nesbit is not really a

fantasy writer. What makes Nesbit great is that her children are real—occasionally irritated, peevish, and foolish, but equally imaginative, cheerful, and loyal. So, even though there is a lot of magic in this book, the adventure comes in not because of the otherworldliness of the magic, but because the children use the magic exactly the way we would use it.

Similarly, the Psammead is not a mysterious or dark fairy, but a furry rodent with snail eyes, bat wings, and monkey hands. Not only that, but it is more likely to make dry and caustic remarks than the average magical creature:

“Don’t you know a Sand-fairy when you see one?”

It looked so grieved and hurt that Jane hastened to say, “Of course I see you are, now. It’s quite plain now one comes to look at you.”

“You came to look at me, several sentences ago,”

(pp. 11-12)

Edith Nesbit has a lot of dry humor in this book, which should delight you since she sometimes lets slip something that is quite insightful:

Grown-up people find it very difficult to believe really wonderful things, unless they have what they call proof. But children will believe almost anything, and grown-ups know this. That is why they

CHAPTER ONE: BEAUTIFUL AS THE DAY

THE HOUSE WAS THREE MILES FROM THE STATION, but before the dusty hired fly had rattled along for five minutes the children began to put their heads out of the carriage window and to say, 'Aren't we nearly there?' And every time they passed a house, which was not very often, they all said, 'Oh, is THIS it?' But it never was, till they reached the very top of the hill, just past the chalk-quarry and before you come to the gravel-pit. And then there was a white house with a green garden and an orchard beyond, and Mother said, 'Here we are!'

'How white the house is,' said Robert.

'And look at the roses,' said Anthea.

'And the plums,' said Jane.

'It is rather decent,' Cyril admitted.

The Baby said, 'Wanty go walky', and the fly stopped with a last rattle and jolt.

Everyone got its legs kicked or its feet trodden on in the scramble to get out of the carriage that very minute, but no one seemed to mind. Mother, curiously enough, was in no hurry to get out; and even when she had come down slowly and by the step, and with no jump at all, she seemed to wish to see the boxes carried in, and even to pay the driver, instead of joining in that first glorious rush round the garden and the orchard and the thorny, thistly, briery, brambly wilderness beyond the broken gate and the dry fountain at the side of the house. But the children were wiser, for once. It was not really a pretty house at all; it was quite ordinary, and Mother thought it was rather inconvenient, and was quite annoyed at there being no shelves, to speak of, and hardly a cupboard in the place. Father used to say that the ironwork on the roof and coping was like an architect's nightmare. But the house was deep in the country, with no other house in sight, and the children had been in London for two years, without so much as once going to the sea-side even for a day by an excursion train, and so the White House seemed to them a sort of Fairy Palace set down in an Earthly Paradise. For London is like prison for children, especially if their relations are not rich.

Of course there are the shops and the theatres, and

CHAPTER 2: GOLDEN GUINEAS

ANTHEA WOKE IN THE MORNING FROM a very real sort of dream, in which she was walking in the Zoological Gardens on a pouring wet day without any umbrella. The animals seemed desperately unhappy because of the rain, and were all growling gloomily. When she awoke, both the growling and the rain went on just the same. The growling was the heavy regular breathing of her sister Jane, who had a slight cold and was still asleep. The rain fell in slow drops on to Anthea's face from the wet corner of a bath-towel which her brother Robert was gently squeezing the water out of, to wake her up, as he now explained.

‘Oh, drop it!’ she said rather crossly; so he did, for he was not a brutal brother, though very ingenious in apple-pie beds, booby-traps, original methods of awakening sleeping relatives, and the other little accomplishments which make home happy.

‘I had such a funny dream,’ Anthea began.

‘So did I,’ said Jane, wakening suddenly and without warning. ‘I dreamed we found a Sand-fairy in the gravel-pits, and it said it was a Sammyadd, and we might have a new wish every day, and—’

‘But that’s what I dreamed,’ said Robert. ‘I was just going to tell you—and we had the first wish directly it said so. And I dreamed you girls were donkeys enough to ask for us all to be beautiful as the day, and we jolly well were, and it was perfectly beastly.’

‘But CAN different people all dream the same thing?’ said Anthea, sitting up in bed, ‘because I dreamed all that as well as about the Zoo and the rain; and Baby didn’t know us in my dream, and the servants shut us out of the house because the radiantness of our beauty was such a complete disguise, and—’

The voice of the eldest brother sounded from across the landing.

‘Come on, Robert,’ it said, ‘you’ll be late for breakfast again—unless you mean to shirk your bath like you did on Tuesday.’

‘I say, come here a sec,’ Robert replied. ‘I didn’t shirk it; I

CHAPTER 3: BEING WANTED

THE MORNING AFTER THE CHILDREN had been the possessors of boundless wealth, and had been unable to buy anything really useful or enjoyable with it, except two pairs of cotton gloves, twelve penny buns, an imitation crocodile-skin purse, and a ride in a pony-cart, they awoke without any of the enthusiastic happiness which they had felt on the previous day when they remembered how they had had the luck to find a Psammead, or Sand-fairy; and to receive its promise to grant them a new wish every day. For now they had had two wishes, Beauty and Wealth, and neither had exactly made them happy. But the happening of strange things, even if

they are not completely pleasant things, is more amusing than those times when nothing happens but meals, and they are not always completely pleasant, especially on the days when it is cold mutton or hash.

There was no chance of talking things over before breakfast, because everyone overslept itself, as it happened, and it needed a vigorous and determined struggle to get dressed so as to be only ten minutes late for breakfast. During this meal some efforts were made to deal with the question of the Psammead in an impartial spirit, but it is very difficult to discuss anything thoroughly and at the same time to attend faithfully to your baby brother's breakfast needs. The Baby was particularly lively that morning. He not only wriggled his body through the bar of his high chair, and hung by his head, choking and purple, but he collared a tablespoon with desperate suddenness, hit Cyril heavily on the head with it, and then cried because it was taken away from him. He put his fat fist in his bread-and-milk, and demanded 'nam', which was only allowed for tea. He sang, he put his feet on the table—he clamoured to 'go walky'. The conversation was something like this:

'Look here—about that Sand-fairy—Look out!—he'll have the milk over.'

Milk removed to a safe distance.

'Yes—about that Fairy—No, Lamb dear, give Panther the narky poon.'

Then Cyril tried. 'Nothing we've had yet has turned

CHAPTER 4: WINGS

THE NEXT DAY WAS VERY WET—TOO wet to go out, and far too wet to think of disturbing a Sand-fairy so sensitive to water that he still, after thousands of years, felt the pain of once having had his left whisker wetted. It was a long day, and it was not till the afternoon that all the children suddenly decided to write letters to their mother. It was Robert who had the misfortune to upset the ink-pot—an unusually deep and full one—straight into that part of Anthea’s desk where she had long pretended that an arrangement of gum and cardboard painted with Indian ink was a secret drawer. It was not exactly Robert’s fault; it was only his misfortune that

he chanced to be lifting the ink across the desk just at the moment when Anthea had got it open, and that that same moment should have been the one chosen by the Lamb to get under the table and break his squeaking bird. There was a sharp convenient wire inside the bird, and of course the Lamb ran the wire into Robert's leg at once; and so, without anyone's meaning to, the secret drawer was flooded with ink. At the same time a stream was poured over Anthea's half-finished letter. So that her letter was something like this:

DARLING MOTHER, I hope you are quite well, and I hope Granny is better. The other day we ...

Then came a flood of ink, and at the bottom these words in pencil:

It was not me upset the ink, but it took such a time clearing up, so no more as it is post-time.—From your loving daughter, ANTHEA.

Robert's letter had not even been begun. He had been drawing a ship on the blotting-paper while he was trying to think of what to say. And of course after the ink was upset he had to help Anthea to clean out her desk, and he promised to make her another secret drawer, better than the other. And she said, 'Well, make it now.' So it was post-time and his letter wasn't done. And the secret drawer wasn't done either.

Cyril wrote a long letter, very fast, and then went to set a trap for slugs that he had read about in the Home-made

CHAPTER 5: NO WINGS

WHETHER ANYONE CRIED OR NOT, there was certainly an interval during which none of the party was quite itself. When they grew calmer, Anthea put her handkerchief in her pocket and her arm round Jane, and said:

‘It can’t be for more than one night. We can signal with our handkerchiefs in the morning. They’ll be dry then. And someone will come up and let us out—’

‘And find the syphon,’ said Cyril gloomily; ‘and we shall be sent to prison for stealing—’

‘You said it wasn’t stealing. You said you were sure it wasn’t.’

'I'm not sure NOW,' said Cyril shortly.

'Let's throw the beastly thing slap away among the trees,' said Robert, 'then no one can do anything to us.'

'Oh yes'—Cyril's laugh was not a lighthearted one—'and hit some chap on the head, and be murderers as well as—as the other thing'

'But we can't stay up here all night,' said Jane; 'and I want my tea.'

'You CAN'T want your tea,' said Robert; 'you've only just had your dinner.'

'But I do want it,' she said; 'especially when you begin talking about stopping up here all night. Oh, Panther—I want to go home! I want to go home!'

'Hush, hush,' Anthea said. 'Don't, dear. It'll be all right, somehow. Don't, don't—'

'Let her cry,' said Robert desperately; 'if she howls loud enough, someone may hear and come and let us out.'

'And see the soda-water thing,' said Anthea swiftly. 'Robert, don't be a brute. Oh, Jane, do try to be a man! It's just the same for all of us.'

Jane did try to 'be a man'—and reduced her howls to sniffs.

There was a pause. Then Cyril said slowly, 'Look here. We must risk that syphon. I'll button it up inside my jacket—perhaps no one will notice it. You others keep well in front of me. There are lights in the clergyman's house. They've not gone to bed yet. We must just yell as loud as ever we can. Now all scream when I say three. Robert, you

CHAPTER 6: A CASTLE AND NO DINNER

THE OTHERS WERE TO BE KEPT IN AS a punishment for the misfortunes of the day before. Of course Martha thought it was naughtiness, and not misfortune—so you must not blame her. She only thought she was doing her duty. You know grown-up people often say they do not like to punish you, and that they only do it for your own good, and that it hurts them as much as it hurts you—and this is really very often the truth.

Martha certainly hated having to punish the children quite as much as they hated to be punished. For one thing, she knew what a noise there would be in the house all day.

And she had other reasons.

‘I declare,’ she said to the cook, ‘it seems almost a shame keeping of them indoors this lovely day; but they are that audacious, they’ll be walking in with their heads knocked off some of these days, if I don’t put my foot down. You make them a cake for tea to-morrow, dear. And we’ll have Baby along of us soon as we’ve got a bit forrard with our work. Then they can have a good romp with him out of the way. Now, Eliza, come, get on with them beds. Here’s ten o’clock nearly, and no rabbits caught!’

People say that in Kent when they mean ‘and no work done’.

So all the others were kept in, but Robert, as I have said, was allowed to go out for half an hour to get something they all wanted. And that, of course, was the day’s wish. He had no difficulty in finding the Sand-fairy, for the day was already so hot that it had actually, for the first time, come out of its own accord, and it was sitting in a sort of pool of soft sand, stretching itself, and trimming its whiskers, and turning its snail’s eyes round and round.

‘Ha!’ it said when its left eye saw Robert; ‘I’ve been looking out for you. Where are the rest of you? Not smashed themselves up with those wings, I hope?’

‘No,’ said Robert; ‘but the wings got us into a row, just like all the wishes always do. So the others are kept indoors, and I was only let out for half-an-hour—to get the wish. So please let me wish as quickly as I can.’

CHAPTER 7: A SIEGE AND BED

THE CHILDREN WERE SITTING IN THE gloomy banqueting-hall, at the end of one of the long bare wooden tables. There was now no hope. Martha had brought in the dinner, and the dinner was invisible, and unfeeling too; for, when they rubbed their hands along the table, they knew but too well that for them there was nothing there BUT table.

Suddenly Cyril felt in his pocket.

‘Right, oh!’ he cried. ‘Look here! Biscuits.’

Rather broken and crumbled, certainly, but still biscuits. Three whole ones, and a generous handful of crumbs and fragments.

'I got them this morning—Cook—and I'd quite forgotten,' he explained as he divided them with scrupulous fairness into four heaps.

They were eaten in a happy silence, though they tasted a little oddly, because they had been in Cyril's pocket all the morning with a hank of tarred twine, some green fir-cones, and a ball of cobbler's wax.

'Yes, but look here, Squirrel,' said Robert; 'you're so clever at explaining about invisibleness and all that. How is it the biscuits are here, and all the bread and meat and things have disappeared?'

'I don't know,' said Cyril after a pause, 'unless it's because WE had them. Nothing about us has changed. Everything's in my pocket all right.'

'Then if we HAD the mutton it would be real,' said Robert. 'Oh, don't I wish we could find it!'

'But we can't find it. I suppose it isn't ours till we've got it in our mouths.'

'Or in our pockets,' said Jane, thinking of the biscuits.

'Who puts mutton in their pockets, goose-girl?' said Cyril. 'But I know—at any rate, I'll try it!'

He leaned over the table with his face about an inch from it, and kept opening and shutting his mouth as if he were taking bites out of air.

'It's no good,' said Robert in deep dejection. 'You'll only: Hullo!'

Cyril stood up with a grin of triumph, holding a square

CHAPTER 8: BIGGER THAN THE BAKER'S BOY

‘**L**OOK HERE,’ SAID CYRIL. ‘I’VE got an idea.’

‘Does it hurt much?’ said Robert sympathetically.

‘Don’t be a jackape! I’m not humbugging.’

‘Shut up, Bobs!’ said Anthea.

‘Silence for the Squirrel’s oration,’ said Robert.

Cyril balanced himself on the edge of the water-butt in the backyard, where they all happened to be, and spoke.

‘Friends, Romans, countrymen—and women—we found a Sammyadd. We have had wishes. We’ve had wings,

and being beautiful as the day—ugh!—that was pretty jolly beastly if you like—and wealth and castles, and that rotten gipsy business with the Lamb. But we're no forrader. We haven't really got anything worth having for our wishes.'

'We've had things happening,' said Robert; 'that's always something.'

'It's not enough, unless they're the right things,' said Cyril firmly. 'Now I've been thinking—'

'Not really', whispered Robert.

'In the silent what's-its-names of the night. It's like suddenly being asked something out of history—the date of the Conquest or something; you know it all right all the time, but when you're asked it all goes out of your head. Ladies and gentlemen, you know jolly well that when we're all rotting about in the usual way heaps of things keep cropping up, and then real earnest wishes come into the heads of the beholder—'

'Hear, hear!' said Robert.

'—of the beholder, however stupid he is,' Cyril went on. 'Why, even Robert might happen to think of a really useful wish if he didn't injure his poor little brains trying so hard to think.—Shut up, Bobs, I tell you!—You'll have the whole show over.'

A struggle on the edge of a water-butt is exciting, but damp. When it was over, and the boys were partially dried, Anthea said:

'It really was you began it, Bobs. Now honour is satisfied,