

OpenTheo

Five Children and It—Chapter 4: Wings

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For the Easter season, I am posting some rather different things on this channel, in addition to my regular output, as a little gift to my followers and supporters. This is the third book I am reading through: 'Five Children and It', by E Nesbit. I hope that you all enjoy!

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Transcript

Chapter 4. Wings. The next day was very wet, too wet to go out and far too wet to think of disturbing a sand ferry so sensitive to water that he still, after thousands of years, felt the pain of once having 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 inkwell, an unusually deep and full one, straight into that part of Anthea's desk where she had long pretended that an arrangement of mucilagin cardboard painted with Indian ink was a secret draw. 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 do it, the secret draw 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 draw, 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 draw 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 homemade gardener, and when it was post-time the letter could not be found, and it was never found. Perhaps the slugs ate it. Jane's letter was the only one that went.

She meant to tell her mother all about the Samyad, in fact they had all meant to do this, but she spent so long thinking how to spell the word that there was no time to tell the story properly, and it is useless to tell a story unless you do tell it properly, so she had to be contented with this. My dear mother dear, we are all as good as we can, like you told us to, and the lamb has a little cold, but Martha says it is nothing, only he upset the goldfish into himself yesterday morning. When we were up at the sandpit the other day we went round by the safe way where the carts go and we found a—half an hour went by before Jane felt quite sure that they could none of them spell Samyad, and they could not find it in the dictionary either, though they looked.

Then Jane hastily finished her letter. We found a strange thing, but it is nearly post-time, so no more at present from your little girl, Jane. P.S. If you could have a wish come true, what would you have? Then the postman was heard blowing his horn, and Robert rushed out in the rain to stop his cart and give him the letters, and that was how it happened that, though all the children meant to tell their mother about the sand-ferry, somehow or other she never got to know.

There were other reasons why she never got to know, but these come later. The next day Uncle Richard came and took them all to Maidstone in a wagonette, all except the lamb. Uncle Richard was the very best kind of uncle.

He bought them toys at Maidstone. He took them into a shop and let them all choose exactly what they wanted, without any restrictions about price, and no nonsense about things being instructive. It is very wise to let children choose exactly what they like, because they are very foolish and inexperienced, and sometimes they will choose a really instructive thing without meaning to do so.

This happened to Robert, who chose, at the last moment and in a great hurry, a box with pictures on it, a winged bull's with men's heads, and winged men with eagles' heads. He thought there would be animals inside, the same as on the box. When he got it home it was a Sunday puzzle about ancient Nineveh.

The others chose in haste and were happy at leisure. Cyril had a model engine and the girls had two dolls, as well as a china tea set with forget-me-nots on it, to be between them. The boys between them was bow and arrow.

Then Uncle Richard took them on the beautiful Medway, in a boat, and they all had tea at a beautiful confectioner's, and when they reached home it was far too late to have any wishes that day. They did not tell Uncle Richard anything about the Samyad. I do not know why, and they do not know why, but I dare say you can guess.

The day after Uncle Richard had behaved so handsomely was a very hot day indeed. The people who decide what the weather is to be, and put its orders down for it in the newspapers every morning, said afterwards that it was the hottest day there had been for years. They had ordered it to be warmer some showers, and warmer it certainly was.

In fact it was so busy being warmer that it had no time to attend to the order about showers, so there weren't any. Have you ever been up at five o'clock on a fine summer morning? It is very beautiful. The sunlight is pinky and yellowy, and all the grass and trees are covered with dew-diamonds, and all the shadows go the opposite way to the way they do in the evening, which is very interesting and makes you feel as though you were in a new other world.

Anthea woke at five. She had made herself wake, and I must tell you how it is done, even if it keeps you waiting for the story to go on. You get into bed at night, and lie down quite flat on your little back, with your hands straight down by your sides.

Then you say, I must wake up at five, or six, or seven, or eight, or nine, or whatever the time is that you want, and as you say it you push your chin down on your chest, and then whack your head back on the pillow. And you do this as many times as there are ones in the time that you want to wake up at. It is quite an easy sum.

Of course everything depends on your really wanting to get up at five, or six, or seven, or eight, or nine. If you don't really want to, it's all of no use, but if you do, well try it and see. Of course in this, as in doing Latin proses or getting into mischief, practice makes perfect.

Anthea was quite perfect. At the very moment when she opened her eyes she heard the black and gold clock down in the dining room, strike eleven, so she knew it was three minutes to five. The black and gold clock always struck wrong, but it was all right when you knew what it meant.

It was like a person talking a foreign language. If you know the language it is just as easy to understand as English, and Anthea knew the clock language. She was very sleepy, but she jumped out of bed and put her face and hands into a basin of cold water.

This is a fairy charm that prevents your wanting to get back into bed again. Then she dressed, and folded up her night-dress. She did not tumble it together by the sleeves, but folded it up by the seams from the hem, and that will show you the kind of well-brought-up little girl she was.

Then she took her shoes in her hand and crept softly down the stairs. She opened the dining room window and climbed out. It would have been just as easy to go out by the door, but the window was more romantic, and less likely to be noticed by Martha.

I will always get up at five, she said to herself. It was quite too awfully pretty for anything. Her heart was beating very fast, for she was carrying out a plan quite her own.

She could not be sure that it was a good plan, but she was quite sure that it would not be any better if she were to tell the others about it, and she had a feeling that, right or wrong, she would rather go through with it alone. She put on her shoes under the iron verandah, on the red and yellow shining tiles, and then she ran straight to the sand-pit, and found the Samyad's place and dug it out. It was very cross indeed.

It's too bad, it said, fluffing up its fur as pigeons do their feathers at Christmas time. The weather's arctic, and it's the middle of the night. I am sorry, said Anthea gently, and she took off her white pinafore and covered the sand-ferry up with it, all but its head, its bat ears, and its eyes that were like a snail's eyes.

Thank you, it said. That's better. What's the wish this morning? I don't know, she said.

That's just it. You see, we've been very unlucky so far. I wanted to talk to you about it, but would you mind not giving me any wishes till after breakfast? It's so hard to talk to anyone if they jump out at you with wishes you don't really want.

You shouldn't say you wish for things if you don't wish for them. In the old days, people almost always knew whether it was Megatherium or Ichthyosaurus they really wanted for dinner. I'll try not to do so, said Anthea, but I do wish.

Look out! said the Samyad in a warning voice, and it began to blow itself out. Oh, this isn't a magic wish, it's just, I should be so glad if you'd not swell yourself out and nearly burst to give me anything just now. Wait till the others are here.

Well, well, it said indulgently, but it shivered. Would you, asked Anthea kindly, would you like to come and sit on my lap? You'd be warmer, and I could turn the skirt of my frock up around you. I'd be very careful.

Anthea had never expected that it would, but it did. Thank you, it said. You really are rather thoughtful.

It crept on to her lap and snuggled down, and she put her arms round it with a rather frightened gentleness. Now then, it said. Well then, said Anthea, everything we have wished has turned out rather horrid.

I wish you would advise us. You are so old, you must be very wise. I was always generous from a child, said the Sand Fairy.

I've spent the whole of my waking hours in giving, but one thing I won't give, that's advice. You see, Anthea went on, it's such a wonderful thing, such a splendid, glorious chance. It's so good and kind and dear of you to give us our wishes, and it seems such a pity it should all be wasted just because we are too silly to know what to wish for.

Anthea had meant to say that, and she had not wanted to say it before the others. It's one thing to say you're silly, and quite another to say that other people are. Child, said the Sand Fairy sleepily, I can only advise you to think before you speak.

But I thought you never gave advice. That piece doesn't count, it said. You'll never take it.

Besides, it's not original. It's in all the copy books. But won't you just say if wings would be a silly wish? Wings, it said, I should think you might do worse.

Only take care you aren't flying high at sunset. There was a little Ninevite boy I heard of once. He was one of King Senecherib's sons, and a traveller brought him a samyad.

He used to keep it in a box of sand on the palace terrace. It was a dreadful degradation for one of us, of course. Still, the boy was the Assyrian king's son.

And one day he wished for wings and got them. But he forgot that they would turn into stone at sunset. And when they did, he fell onto one of the winged lions at the top of his father's great staircase.

And what with his stone wings and the lion's stone wings, well, it's not a very pretty story. But I believe the boy enjoyed himself very much till then. Tell me, said Anthea, why don't our wishes turn into stone now? Why do they just vanish? Autre temps, autrement, said the creature.

Is that the Ninevite language? asked Anthea, who had learned no foreign language at school except French. What I mean is, the samyad went on, that in the old days people wished for good, solid, everyday gifts. Mammoths and pterodactyls and things.

And those could be turned into stone as easy as not. But people wish such high-flying, fanciful things nowadays. How are you going to turn being beautiful as the day, or being

wanted by everybody, into stone? You see, it can't be done.

And it would never do to have two rules, so they simply vanish. If being beautiful as the day could be turned into stone, it would last an awfully long time, you know. Much longer than you would.

Just look at the Greek statues. It's just as well as it is. Goodbye.

Goodbye. I am so sleepy. It jumped off her lap, dug frantically, and vanished.

Anthea was late for breakfast. It was Robert who quietly poured a spoonful of molasses down the lamb's frock, so that he had to be taken away and washed thoroughly directly after breakfast. And it was of course a very naughty thing to do, yet it served two purposes.

It delighted the lamb, who loved above all things to be completely sticky, and it engaged Martha's attention so that the others could slip away to the sandpit without the lamb. They did it, and in the lane Anthea, breathless from the hurry of that slipping, planted out. I want to propose we take turns to wish.

Only nobody's to have a wish if the others don't think it's a nice wish. Do you agree? Who's to have first wish? asked Robert cautiously. Me, if you don't mind, said Anthea apologetically.

And I've thought about it, and it's wings. There was a silence. The others rather wanted to find fault, but it was hard, because the word wings raised a flutter of joyous excitement in every breast.

Not so dusty, said Cyril generously, and Robert added. Really, Panther, you're not quite such a fool as you look. Jane said, I think it would be perfectly lovely.

It's like a bright dream of delirium. They found the sand fairy easily. Anthea said, I wish we all had beautiful wings to fly with.

The sand fairy blew himself out, and next moment each child felt a funny feeling, half heaviness and half lightness on its shoulders. The Samoyed put its head on one side and turned its snail eyes from one side to the other. Not so bad, said Dreamly.

But really, Robert, you're not quite such an angel as you look. Robert almost blushed. The wings were very big, and more beautiful than you can possibly imagine, for they were soft and smooth, and every feather lay neatly in its place, and the feathers were of the most lively mixed changing colours, like the rainbow or iridescent glass, or the beautiful scum that sometimes floats on water that is not at all nice to drink.

Oh, but can we fly? Jane said, standing anxiously first on one foot and then on the other. Look out, said Cyril. You're treading on my wing.

Does it hurt? asked Anthea with interest, but no one answered, for Robert had spread his wings and jumped up, and now he was slowly rising in the air. He looked very awkward in his knickerbocker suit, his boots in particular hung helplessly and seemed much larger than when he was standing in them, but the others cared but little how he looked, or how they looked for that matter, for now they all spread out their wings and rose in the air. Of course you all know what flying feels like, because everyone has dreamed about flying, and it seems so beautifully easy, only you can never remember how you did it, and as a rule you have to do it without wings, in your dreams, which is more clever and uncommon, but not so easy to remember the rule for.

Now the four children rose flapping from the ground, and you can't think how good the air felt as it ran against their faces. Their wings were tremendously wide when they were spread out, and they had to fly quite a long way apart so as not to get in each other's way, but little things like this are easily learned. All the words in the English dictionary, and in the Greek lexicon as well, are, I find, of no use at all to tell you exactly what it feels like to be flying, so I will not try, but I will say that to look down on the fields and woods instead of along at them is something like looking at a beautiful live map, where instead of silly colours on paper, you have real moving sunny woods and green fields laid out one after the other, as Cyril said, and I can't think where he got hold of such a strange expression.

It does you a fair treat! It was most wonderful and more like real magic than any wish the children had had yet. They flapped and flew and sailed on their great rainbow wings, between green earth and blue sky, and they flew over Rochester and then swerved round towards Maidstone, and presently they all began to feel extremely hungry. Curiously enough, this happened when they were flying rather low, and just as they were crossing an orchard, where some early plums shone red and ripe, they paused on their wings.

I cannot explain to you how this is done, but this is something like treading water when you are swimming, and hawks do it extremely well. Yes, I dare say, said Cyril, though no one had spoken, but stealing is stealing even if you've got wings. Do you really think so? said Jane briskly.

If you've got wings, you're a bird, and no one minds birds breaking the commandments. At least, they may mind, but the birds always do it, and no one scolds them or sends them to prison. It was not so easy to perch on a plum tree as you might think, because the rainbow wings were so very large, but somehow they all managed to do it, and the plums were certainly very sweet and juicy.

Fortunately, it was not till they had all had quite as many plums as were good for them, that they saw a stout man, who looked exactly as though he owned the plum trees, come hurrying through the orchard gate with a thick stick, and with one accord they

disentangled their wings from the plum-laden branches and began to fly. The man stopped short, with his mouth open, for he had seen the boughs of his trees moving and twitching, and he had said to himself, Them young varmint at it again! And he had come out at once, for the lads of the village had taught him in past seasons that plums weren't looking after. But when he saw the rainbow wings flutter up out of the plum tree, he felt that he must have gone quite mad, and he did not like the feeling at all.

And when Anthea looked down and saw his mouth go slowly open and stay so, and his face become green and mauve in patches, she called out, Don't be frightened! and felt hastily in her pocket for a throppiny bit with a hole in it, which she had meant to hang on a ribbon round her neck, for luck. She hovered round the unfortunate plum-owner and said, We have had some of your plums, we thought it wasn't stealing, but now I am not so sure, so here's some money to pay for them. She swooped down toward the terror-stricken grower of plums and slipped the coin into the pocket of his jacket, and in a few flaps she had rejoined the others.

The farmer sat down on the grass, suddenly and heavily. Well, I'm blessed, he said. This here's what they call delusions, I suppose.

But this here throppiny—he had pulled it out and bitten it—that's real enough. Well, from this day forth I'll be a better man. It's the kind of thing to sober a chap for life, this is.

I'm glad it was only wings, though. I'd rather see the birds as aren't there, and couldn't be, even if they pretend to talk, than some things as I could name. He got up slowly and heavily and went indoors, and he was so nice to his wife that day that she felt quite happy, and said to herself, Lor, whatever have I come to the man? and smartened herself up and put a blue-ribbon bow at the place where her collar fastened on, and looked so pretty that he was kinder than ever.

So perhaps the winged children really did do one good thing that day. If so, it was the only one, for really there is nothing like wings for getting you into trouble. But, on the other hand, if you are in trouble, there is nothing like wings for getting you out of it.

This was the case in the matter of the fierce dog who sprang out at them when they had folded up their wings as small as possible, and were going up to a farm door to ask for a crust of bread and cheese, for in spite of the plums they were soon just as hungry as ever again. Now there is no doubt whatever that, if the four had been ordinary wingless children, that black and fierce dog would have had a good bite out of the brown stocking leg of Robert, who was the nearest. But at its first growl there was a flutter of wings, and the dog was left to strain at his chain and stand on his hind legs, as if he were trying to fly too.

They tried several other farms, but at those where there were no dogs the people were far too frightened to do anything but scream. And at last, when it was nearly four o'clock,

and their wings were getting miserably stiff and tired, they alighted on a church tower and held a council of war. We can't possibly fly all the way home without dinner or tea, said Robert with desperate decision.

And nobody will give us any dinner or even lunch, let alone tea, said Cyril. Perhaps the clergyman here might, suggested Anthea. He must know all about angels.

Anybody could see we're not that, said Jane. Look at Robert's boots and Squirrel's plaid necktie. Well, said Cyril firmly, if the country you're in won't sell provisions, you take them.

In wars, I mean. I'm quite certain you do, and even in other stories no good brother would allow his little sisters to starve in the midst of plenty. Plenty? repeated Robert hungrily, and the others looked vaguely round the bare leads of the church tower and murmured, in the midst of? Yes, said Robert impressively.

There is a larder window at the side of the clergyman's house, and I saw things to eat inside, custard pudding and cold chicken and tongue and pies and jam. It's rather a high window, but with wings. How clever of you, said Jane.

Not at all, said Cyril modestly. Any born general, Napoleon or the Duke of Marlborough, would have seen it just the same as I did. It seems very wrong, said Anthea.

Nonsense, said Cyril. What was it Sir Philip Sidney said when the soldier wouldn't give him a drink? My necessity is greater than his. We'll club together our money, though, and leave it to pay for the things, won't we? Anthea was persuasive, and very nearly in tears, because it is most trying to feel enormously hungry and unspeakably sinful at one and the same time.

Some of it, was the cautious reply. Everyone now turned out its pockets on the lead roof of the tower, where visitors for the last hundred and fifty years had cut their own and their sweethearts' initials with pen-knives in the soft lead. There was five and seven pence, half-penny altogether, and even the upright Anthea admitted that that was too much to pay for four people's dinners.

Robert said he thought eighteen pence, and half a crown was finally agreed to be handsome. So Anthea wrote on the back of her last term's report, which happened to be in her pocket, and from which she first tore her own name and that of the school, the following letter. Dear Reverend Clergyman, We are very hungry indeed because of having to fly all day, and we think it is not stealing when you are starving to death.

We are afraid to ask you for fear you should say no, because of course you know about angels, but you would not think we were angels. We will only take the necessities of life, and no pudding or pie, to show you it is not greediness but true starvation that makes us make your larder stand and deliver, but we are not highwaymen by trade. Cut it short,

said the others with one accord, and Anthea hastily added, our intentions are quite honourable if you only knew, and here is half a crown to show we are sincere and grateful.

Thank you for your kind hospitality. From us four. The half crown was wrapped in this letter, and all the children felt that when the clergyman had read it, he would understand everything, as well as anyone could who had not even seen the wings.

Now, said Cyril, of course there's some risk. We'd better fly straight down the other side of the tower, and then flutter low across the churchyard and in through the shrubbery. There doesn't seem to be anyone about, but you never know.

The window looks out into the shrubbery. It is embowered in foliage, like a window in a story. I'll go in and get the things.

Robert and Anthea can take them as I hand them out through the window, and Jane can keep watch. Her eyes are sharp, and whistle if she sees anyone about. Shut up, Robert.

She can whistle quite well enough for that anyway. It ought not to be a very good whistle. It'll sound more natural and bird-like.

Now then, off we go. I cannot pretend that stealing is right. I can only say that on this occasion it did not look like stealing to the hungry four, but appeared in the light of a fair and reasonable business transaction.

They had never happened to learn that a tongue, hardly cut into, a chicken and a half, a loaf of bread, and a siphon of soda-water cannot be bought in the stores for half a crown. These were the necessaries of life which Cyril handed out of the larder window, when, quite unobserved and without hindrance or adventure, he had led the others to that happy spot. He felt that to refrain from jam, apple pie, cake, and mixed candied peel was a really heroic act.

I agree with him. He was also proud of not taking the custard pudding. And there I think he was wrong, because if he had taken it, there would have been a difficulty about returning the dish.

No one, however starving, has a right to steal China pie dishes with little pink flowers on them. The soda-water siphon was different. They could not do without something to drink, and as the maker's name was on it, they felt sure it would be returned to him wherever they might leave it.

If they had time, they would have taken it back themselves. The man appeared to live in Rochester, which would not be much out of their way home. Everything was carried up to the top of the tower, and laid down on a sheet of kitchen paper which Cyril had found on the top shelf of the larder.

As he unfolded it, Anthea said, I don't think that's a necessity of life. Yes, it is, said he. We must keep the things down somewhere to cut them up, and I heard fathers say the other day people got diseases from Germans in rainwater.

Now there must be lots of rainwater here, and when it dries up the Germans are left, and they'd get into the things, and we should all die of scarlet fever. What are Germans? Little waggly things you see with microscopes, said Cyril, with a scientific air. They give you every illness you can think of.

I'm sure the paper was a necessary, just as much as the bread and meat and water. Now then, oh, I'm hungry. I do not wish to describe the picnic party on the top of the tower.

You can imagine well enough what it is like to carve a chicken and a tongue with a knife that has only one blade, and that snapped off short about half way down. But it was done. Eating with your fingers is greasy and difficult, and paper dishes soon get to look very sparty and horrid.

But one thing you can't imagine, and that is how soda water behaves when you try to drink it straight out of a siphon, especially a quite full one. But if imagination will not help you, experience will, and you can easily try it for yourself if you can get a grown-up to give you the siphon. If you want to have a really thorough experience, put the tube in your mouth and press the handle very suddenly and very hard.

You had better do it when you are alone, and out of doors is best for this experiment. However you eat them, tongue and chicken and new bread are very good things, and no one minds being sprinkled a little with soda water on a really fine hot day. So everyone enjoyed that dinner very much indeed, and everyone ate as much as it possibly could, first because it was extremely hungry, and second because, as I said, tongue and chicken and new bread are very nice.

Now I dare say you will have noticed that if you have to wait for your dinner till long after the proper time, and then eat a great deal more dinner than usual, and sit in the hot sun on the top of a church tower, or even anywhere else, you become soon and strangely sleepy. Now Anthea and Jane and Cyril and Robert were very like you in many ways, and when they had eaten all they could and drunk all there was, they became sleepy, strangely and soon, especially Anthea because she had gotten up so early. One by one they left off talking and leaned back, and before it was a quarter of an hour after dinner, they had all curled round and tucked themselves up under their large soft warm wings, and were fast asleep.

And the sun was sinking slowly in the west, I must say it was in the west, because it is usual in books to say so, for fear careless people should think it was setting in the east. In point of fact it was not exactly in the west either, but that's near enough. The sun, I repeat, was sinking slowly in the west, and the children slept warmly and happily on, for

wings are cozier than eiderdown quilts to sleep under.

The shadow of the clock tower fell across the churchyard, and across the vicarage, and across the field beyond, and presently there were no more shadows, and the sun had set, and the wings were gone. And still the children slept, but not for long. Twilight is very beautiful, but it is chilly, and you know, however sleepy you are, you wake up soon enough if your brother or sister happens to be up first and pulls your blankets off you.

The four wingless children shivered and woke, and there they were, on the top of a church tower in the dusky twilight, with blue stars coming out by ones and twos and tens and twenties over their heads, miles away from home, with three shillings and three half-pence in their pockets, and a doubtful act about the necessities of life to be accounted for, if anyone found them with the soda-water siphon. They looked at each other. Cyril spoke first, picking up the siphon.

We'd better get along down and get rid of this beastly thing. It's dark enough to leave it on the clergyman's doorstep, I should think. Come on.

There was a little turret at the corner of the tower, and the little turret had a door in it. They had noticed this when they were eating, but had not explored it, as you would have done in their place. Because, of course, when you have wings and can explore the whole sky, doors seem hardly worth exploring.

Now they turned towards it. Of course, said Cyril, this is the way down. It was.

But the door was locked on the inside, and the world was growing darker and darker, and they were miles from home, and there was the soda-water siphon. I shall not tell you whether anyone cried, nor, if so, how many cried, nor who cried. You will be better employed in making up your minds what you would have done if you had been in their place.