

OpenTheo

Five Children and It—Chapter 3: Being Wanted

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Alastair Roberts

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 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-skinned 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 Samoyed 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 musing 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 Samoyed 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 highchair and hung by his head choking and purple, but he seized 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 walkie! The conversation was something like this, Look here, about that sand-ferry. Look out, he'll have the milk over! Milk removed to a safe distance. Yes, about that ferry.

Note, lamb-deer, give panther the narky-poon. Then Cyril tried, Nothing we've had yet has turned out. He nearly had the mustard that time.

I wonder whether we'd better wish, Hello! You've done it now, my boy! And in a flash of glass and pink baby paws, the bowl of golden carp in the middle of the table rolled on its side and poured a flood of mixed water and goldfish into the baby's lap and into the laps of the others. Everyone was almost as upset as the goldfish, the lamb only remaining calm. When the pool on the floor had been mopped up and the leaping, gasping goldfish had been collected and put back in the water, the baby was taken away to be entirely redressed by Martha and most of the others had to change completely.

The pinafores and jackets that had been bathed in goldfish and water were hung out to dry and then it turned out that Jane must either mend the dress she had torn the day before or appear all day in her best petticoat. It was white and soft and frilly and trimmed with lace and very, very pretty, quite as pretty as a frock, if not more so. Only it was not a frock and Martha's word was law.

She wouldn't let Jane wear her best frock and she refused to listen for a moment to Robert's suggestion that Jane should wear her best petticoat and call it a dress. It's not respectable, she said, and when people say that, it's no use anyone saying anything. You'll find this out for yourselves some day.

So there was nothing for it but for Jane to mend her frock. The hole had been torn the day before when she happened to tumble down in the high street of Rochester, just where a water cart had passed on its silvery way. She had grazed her knee and her stocking was much more than grazed, and her dress was cut by the same stone which had attended to the knee and the stocking.

Of course the others were not such sneaks as to abandon a comrade in misfortune, so they all sat on the grass plot round the sundial and Jane darned away for dear life. The lamb was still in the hands of Martha having its clothes changed, so conversation was

possible. Anthea and Robert timidly tried to conceal their inmost thought, which was that the Samoyed was not to be trusted, but Cyril said, Speak out! Say what you've got to say! I hate hinting and don't know and sneakish ways like that.

So then Robert said, as in honour bound, Sneak yourself! Anthea and me weren't so goldfishy as you two were, so we got changed quicker and we've had time to think it over and if you ask me... I didn't ask you, said Jane, biting up a needle full of thread as she had always been strictly forbidden to do. Perhaps you don't know that if you bite off ends of cotton and swallow them they wind tight round your heart and kill you. My nurse told me this, and she told me also about the earth going round the sun.

Now what is one to believe, what with nurses and science? I don't care who asks or who doesn't, said Robert, but Anthea and I think the Samoyed is a spiteful brute. If it can give us our wishes I suppose it can give itself its own, and I feel almost sure it wishes every time that our wishes shan't do us any good. Let's let the tiresome beast alone and just go and have a jolly good game of forts on our own in the chalk pit.

You will remember that the happily situated house where these children were spending their holidays lay between a chalk quarry and a gravel pit. Cyril and Jane were more hopeful, they generally were. I don't think the Samoyed does it on purpose, Cyril said, and after all it was silly to wish for boundless wealth.

Fifty pounds and two shilling pieces would have been much more sensible, and wishing to be beautiful as the day was simply donkeyish. I don't want to be disagreeable, but it was. We must try to find a really useful wish and wish it.

Jane dropped her work and said, I think so too, it's too silly to have a chance like this and not use it. I never heard of anyone else outside of book who had such a chance. There must be simply heaps of things we could wish for that wouldn't turn out dead sea fish, like these two things have.

Do let's think hard and wish something nice, so that we can have a really jolly day, what there is left of it. Jane darned away like mad, for time was indeed getting on, and everyone began to talk at once. If you had been there you could not possibly have made head or tail of the talk, but these children were used to talking by fours as soldiers march, and each of them could say what it had to say quite comfortably, and listen to the agreeable sound of its own voice, and at the same time have three quarters of two sharp ears to spare for listening to what the others said.

That is an easy example in multiplication of vulgar fractions, but as I dare say you can't do even that, I won't ask you to tell me whether three quarters times two equals one minus a half, but I will ask you to believe me that this was the amount of ear each child was able to lend to the others. Lending ears was common in Roman times, as we learn from Shakespeare, but I fear I'm getting too instructive. When the frock was darned, the

start for the gravel pit was delayed by Martha's insisting on everybody's washing its hands, which was nonsense, because nobody had been doing anything at all, except Jane, and how can you get dirty doing nothing? That is a difficult question, and I cannot answer it on paper.

In real life I could very soon show you, or you me, which is much more likely. During the conversation in which the six ears were lent, there were four children, so that sum comes right. It had been decided that fifty pounds in two shilling pieces was the right wish to have, and the lucky children, who could have anything in the wide world by just wishing for it, hurriedly started for the gravel pit to express their wishes to the Samoyed.

Martha caught them at the gate, and insisted on their taking the baby with them. "Not want him indeed? Why, everybody o'd want him a duck, with all their hearts they would, and you know you promised your ma to take him out every blessed day," said Martha. "I know we did," said Robert in gloom, "but I wish the lamb wasn't quite so young and small.

It would be much better fun taking him out.' "He'll mend of his youngness with time," said Martha, "and as for smallness, I don't think you'd fancy carrying of him any more, however big he was. Besides, he can walk a bit, bless his precious fat legs, a ducky. He feels the benefit of the new laid air, so he does, a pet.' With this and a kiss, she plumped the lamb into Anthea's arms, and went back to make new pinafores on the sewing machine.

She was a rapid performer on this instrument. The lamb laughed with pleasure, and said, "Walky with panty!" and rode on Robert's back with yells of joy, and tried to feed Jane with stones, and altogether made himself so agreeable that nobody could long be sorry that he was of the party. The enthusiastic Jane even suggested that they should devote a week's wishes to assuring the baby's future, by asking such gifts for him as the good fairies give to infant princes in proper fairy tales.

But Anthea soberly reminded her that as the sand-fairies' wishes only lasted till sunset, they could not ensure any benefit to the baby's later years, and Jane owned that it would be better to wish for fifty pounds and two shilling pieces, and buy the lamb a three-pound fifteen rocking-horse, like those in the big stores, with a part of the money. It was settled that, as soon as they had wished for the money and got it, they would get Mr. Crispin to drive them into Rochester again, taking Martha with them if they could not get out of taking her, and they would make a list of things they really wanted before they started. Full of high hopes and excellent resolutions, they went round the safe, slow cart-road to the gravel pits, and as they went in between the mounds of gravel, a sudden thought came to them, and would have turned their ruddy cheeks pale if they had been children in a book.

Being real, live children, it only made them stop and look at each other with rather blank

and silly expressions, for now they remembered that yesterday, when they had asked the Samoyed for boundless wealth, and it was getting ready to fill the quarry with the minted gold of Bright Guineas, millions of them, it had told the children to run along outside the quarry for fear they should be buried alive in the heavy splendid treasure, and they had run, and so it happened that they had not had time to mark the spot where the Samoyed was, with a ring of stones, as before, and it was this thought that put such silly expressions on their faces. Never mind, said the hopeful Jane, we'll soon find him. But this, though easily said, was hard in the doing.

They looked and they looked, and though they found their seaside spades, nowhere could they find the sand-ferry. At last they had to sit down and rest. Not at all because they were weary or disheartened, of course, but because the lamb insisted on being put down, and you cannot look very carefully after anything you may have happened to lose in the sand if you have an active baby to look after at the same time.

Get someone to drop your best knife in the sand next time you go to the seashore, and then take your baby brother with you when you go to look for it, and you will see that I am right. The lamb, as Martha had said, was feeling the benefit of the country air, and he was as frisky as a sand-hopper. The elder ones longed to go on talking about the new wishes they would have when, or if, they found the Samoyed again.

But the lamb wished to enjoy himself. He watched his opportunity and threw a handful of sand into Anthea's face, and then suddenly burrowed his own head in the sand and waved his fat legs in the air. Then, of course, the sand got into his eyes, as it had into Anthea's, and he howled.

The thoughtful Robert had brought one solid brown bottle of ginger beer with him, relying on a thirst that had never yet failed him. This had to be uncorked hurriedly. It was the only wet thing within reach, and it was necessary to wash the sand out of the lamb's eye somehow.

Of course the ginger hurt horribly, and he howled more than ever. And, amid his anguish of kicking, the bottle was upset, and the beautiful ginger beer frothed out into the sand and was lost for ever. It was then that Robert, usually a very patient brother, so far forgot himself as to say, "'Anybody would want him indeed.' Only they don't.

Martha doesn't, not really, or she'd jolly well keep him with her. He's a little nuisance, that's what he is. It's too bad.

I only wish everybody did want him with all their hearts. We might get some peace in our lives." The lamb stopped howling now, because Jane had suddenly remembered that there is only one safe way of taking things out of little children's eyes, and that is with your own soft wet tongue. It is quite easy if you love the baby as much as you ought to do.

Then there was a little silence. Robert was not proud of himself for having been so cross, and the others were not proud of him either. You often notice that silence when someone has said something it ought not to, and everyone else holds its tongue and waits for the one who ordained to have said it is sorry.

The silence was broken by a sigh, a breath suddenly let out, the children's heads turned as if there had been a string tied to each nose, and somebody had pulled all the strings at once. And everyone saw the sand-ferry sitting quite close to them, with the expression which it used as a smile on its hairy face. "Good morning," it said.

"I did that quite easily. Everyone wants him now." "It doesn't matter," said Robert sulkily, because he knew he had been behaving rather like a pig. No matter who wants him, there's no one here to anyhow.

"Ingratitude," said the Samoyed, "is a dreadful vice." "We're not ungrateful," Jane made haste to say, "but we didn't really want that wish. Robert only just said it. Can't you take it back and give us a new one?" "No, I can't," the sand-ferry said shortly.

"Chopping and changing, it's not business. You ought to be careful what you do wish. There was a little boy once, he'd wished for a plesiosaurus instead of an ichthyosaurus because he was too lazy to remember the easy names of everyday things, and his father had been very vexed with him, and had made him go to bed before tea-time and wouldn't let him go out into the nice flint boat along with the other children.

It was the annual school treat next day, and he came and flung himself down near me on the morning of the treat, and he kicked his little prehistoric legs about and said he wished he was dead. And of course, then he was." "How awful!" said the children all together. "Only till sunset, of course," the samoyed said.

"Still, it was quite enough for his father and mother, and he caught it when he woke up, I'll tell you. He didn't turn to stone, I forget why, but there must have been some reason. They didn't know being dead is only being asleep, and you're bound to wake up somewhere or other, either when you go to sleep or in some better place.

You may be sure he caught it, giving them such a turn. Why, he wasn't allowed to taste Megatherium for a month after that. Nothing but oysters and periwinkles and common things like that.' All the children were quite crushed by this terrible tale.

They looked at the samoyed in horror. Suddenly the lamb perceived that something brown and furry was near him. "Poof! Poof! Poofy!" he said, and made a grab.

"It's not a pussy," Anthea was beginning, when the sand fairy leaped back. "Oh, my left whisker!" it said. 'Don't let him touch me! He's wet!' Its fur stood on end with horror, and indeed a good deal of the ginger beer had been spilt on the blue smock of the lamb.

The samoyed dug with its hands and feet and vanished in an instant in a whirl of sand. The children marked the spot with a ring of stones. "'We may as well get along home,' said Robert.

"'I'll say I'm sorry. But anyway, if it's no good, it's no harm, and we know where the sandy thing is for tomorrow.' The others were noble. No one reproached Robert at all.

Cyril picked up the lamb, who was now quite himself again, and off they went by the safe cart road. The cart road from the gravel pits joins the road almost directly. At the gate into the road the parties stopped to shift the lamb from Cyril's back to Robert's, and as they paused a very smart open carriage came in sight, with a coachman and a groom on the box, and inside the carriage a lady, very grand indeed, with a dress all white lace and red ribbons and a parasol all red and white, and a white fluffy dog on her lap with a red ribbon round its neck.

She looked at the children, and particularly at the baby, and she smiled at him. The children were used to this, for the lamb was, as all the servants said, a very taking child. So they waved their hands politely to the lady and expected her to drive on.

But she did not. Instead she made the coachman stop, and she beckoned to Cyril, and when he went up to the carriage she said, What a dear darling duck of a baby! Oh, I should so like to adopt it. Do you think its mother would mind? She'd mind very much indeed, said Anthea shortly.

Oh, but I should bring it up in luxury, you know. I am Lady Chittenden. You must have seen my photograph in the illustrated papers.

They call me a beauty, you know. But of course that's all nonsense anyway. She opened the carriage door and jumped out.

She had the wonderfulest red high-heeled shoes with silver buckles. Let me hold him a minute, she said, and she took the lamb and held him very awkwardly, as if she was not used to babies. Then suddenly she jumped into the carriage with the lamb in her arms and slammed the door and said, Drive on! The lamb roared, the little white dog barked, and the coachman hesitated.

Drive on, I tell you, cried the lady, and the coachman did, for, as he said afterwards, was as much as his place was worth not to. The four children looked at each other, and then with one accord they rushed after the carriage and held on behind. Down the dusty road went the smart carriage, and after it, at double quick time, ran the twinkling legs of the lamb's brothers and sisters.

The lamb howled louder and louder, but presently his howls changed by slow degrees to hiccupy gurgles, and then all was still, and they knew he had gone to sleep. The carriage went on, and the eight feet that twinkled through the dust were growing quite stiff and

tired before the carriage stopped at the lodge of a grand park. The children crouched down behind the carriage, and the lady got out.

She looked at the baby as it lay on the carriage seat and hesitated. The darling, I won't disturb it, she said, and went into the lodge to talk to the woman there about a setting of eggs that had not turned out well. The coachman and footman sprang from the box and bent over the sleeping lamb.

Fine boy, wish you was mine, said the coachman. He wouldn't favour you much, said the groom sourly. Too handsome.

The coachman pretended not to hear. He said, wonder at her now. I do really.

Hates kids. Got none of her own, and can't abide other folks's. The children crouched in the white dust under the carriage, exchanged uncomfortable glances.

Tell you what. The coachman went on firmly. Blowed if I don't hide the little nipper in the hedge and tell her his brothers took him.

Then I'll come back for him afterwards. No, you don't, said the footman. I've took to that kid so as never was.

If anyone's to have him, it's me. So there. Stop your talk, the coachman rejoined.

You don't want no kids, and if you did, one kid's the same as another to you. But I'm a married man and a judge of breed. I know a first-rate yearling when I sees him.

I'm a going to have him. And least said, soon as mended. I should have thought, said the footman sneeringly.

You'd almost enough. What with Alfred and Albert and Louise and Victor Stanley and Helena Beatrice and another. The coachman hit the footman in the chin.

The footman hit the coachman in the waistcoat. The next minute, the two were fighting here and there, in and out, up and down, and all over everywhere. And the little dog jumped on the box of the carriage and began barking like mad.

Cyril, still crouching in the dust, waddled on bent legs to the side of the carriage farthest from the battlefield. He unfastened the door of the carriage. The two men were far too much occupied with their quarrel to notice anything.

Took the lamb in his arms, and still stooping, carried the sleeping baby a dozen yards along the road to where a stile led into a wood. The others followed. And there among the hazels and young oaks and sweet chestnuts, covered by high, strong-scented brake-fern, they all lay hidden till the angry voices of the men were hushed at the angry voice of the Red and White Lady, and, after a long and anxious search, the carriage at last

drove away.

My only hat, said Cyril, drawing a deep breath as the sound of wheels at last died away. Everyone does want him now, and no mistake. That Samyad has done us again, tricky brute.

For any sake, let's get the kids safe home. So they peeped out, and finding on the right hand only Lonely White Road, and nothing but Lonely White Road on the left, they took courage, and the road, Anthea carrying the sleeping lamb. Adventures dogged their footsteps.

A boy with a bundle of sticks on his back dropped his bundle by the roadside, and asked to look at the baby, and then offered to carry him. But Anthea was not to be caught that way twice. They all walked on, but the boy followed, and Cyril and Robert couldn't make him go away till they had more than once invited him to smell their fists.

Afterwards, a little girl in a blue and white checked pinafore actually followed them for a quarter of a mile, crying for, The precious baby! And then she was only got rid of by threats of tying her to a tree in the woods, with all their pocket handkerchiefs. So that bears can come and eat you as soon as it gets dark, said Cyril severely. Then she went off crying.

It presently seemed wise to the brothers and sisters of the baby who was wanted by everyone, to hide in the hedge whenever they saw anyone coming, and thus they managed to prevent the lamb from arousing the inconvenient affection of a milkman, a stonebreaker, and a man who drove a cart with a paraffin barrel at the back of it. They were nearly home when the worst thing of all happened. Turning a corner suddenly, they came upon two vans, a tent, and a company of gypsies encamped by the side of the road.

The vans were hung all round with wicker chairs and cradles, and flower stands and feather brushes. A lot of ragged children were industriously making dust pies in the road. Two men lay on the grass smoking, and three women were doing the family washing in an old red watering can, with the top broken off.

In a moment every gypsy, men, women and children, surrounded Anthea and the baby. Let me hold him, little lady, said one of the gypsy women, who had a mahogany-coloured face and dust-coloured hair. I won't hurt a hair of his head, the little picture.

I'd rather not, said Anthea. Let me have him, said the other woman, whose face was also of the hue of mahogany, and her hair jet-black in greasy curls. I've nineteen of my own, so I have.

No, said Anthea bravely, but her heart beat so that it nearly choked her. Then one of the men pushed forward. Swelp me if I ain't, he cried.

My own long-lost shield. Have he a strawberry mark on his left ear? No? Then he's my own babby, stolen from me in innocent infancy. Hand him over, and we'll not have the Lorinia this time.

He snatched the baby from Anthea, who turned scarlet and burst into tears of pure rage. The others were standing quite still. This was much the most terrible thing that had ever happened to them.

Even being taken up by the police in Rochester was nothing to this. Cyril was quite white, and his hands trembled a little, but he made a sign to the others to shut up. He was silent a minute, thinking hard.

Then he said, We don't want to keep him if he's yours, but you see he's used to us. You shall have him if you want him. No, no, cried Anthea, and Cyril glared at her.

Of course we want him, said the women, trying to get the baby out of the man's arms. Lamb howled loudly. Oh, he's hurt, shrieked Anthea, and Cyril in a savage undertone bade her stop it.

You trust to me, he whispered. Look here, he went on, he's awfully tiresome with people he doesn't know very well. Suppose we stay here a bit till he gets used to you, and then when it's bedtime I give you my word of honour we'll go away and let you keep him if you want to, and then when we're gone you can decide which of you is to have him, as you all want him so much.

That's fair enough, said the man who was holding the baby, trying to loosen the red neckerchief which the lamb had caught hold of, and drawn round his mahogany throat so tight that he could hardly breathe. The gypsies whispered together, and Cyril took the chance to whisper too. He said, Sunset, we'll get away then.

And then his brothers and sisters were filled with wonder and admiration at his having been so clever as to remember this. Oh, do let him come to us, said Jane. See, we'll sit down here and take care of him for you till he gets used to you.

What about dinner? said Robert suddenly. The others looked at him with scorn. Fancy bothering about your beastly dinner when you're bro- I mean when the baby- Jane whispered hotly.

Robert carefully winked at her and went on. You won't mind my just running home to get our dinner, he said to the gypsy. I can bring it out here in a basket.

His brothers and sisters felt themselves very noble and despised him. They did not know his thoughtful secret intention, but the gypsies did in a minute. Oh yes, they said, and then fetched the police with a pack of lies about it being your baby instead of ours.

Do you ever catch a weasel asleep? they asked. If you're hungry, you can pick a bit along a bus, said the light-haired gypsy woman, not unkindly. Here, Levi, that blessed kiddle howl all its buttons off.

Give him to the little lady and let's see if they can't get him used to us a bit. So the lamb was handed back, but the gypsies crowded so closely that he could not possibly stop howling. Then the man with the red handkerchief said, Here, Pharaoh, make up the fire and you girls see to the pot.

Give the kid a chanced. So the gypsies, very much against their will, went off to their work, and the children and the lamb were left sitting on the grass. He'll be all right at sunset, Jane whispered, but oh, it is awful.

Suppose they are frightfully angry when they come to their senses. They might beat us or leave us tied to trees or something. No, they won't, Anthea said.

Oh, my lamb, don't cry any more. It's all right. Panties got you, ducky.

They aren't unkind people, or they wouldn't be going to give us any dinner. Dinner? said Robert. I won't touch their nasty dinner.

It would choke me. The others thought so too then, but when the dinner was ready, it turned out to be supper, and happened between four and five, they were all glad enough to take what they could get. It was boiled rabbit with onions and some bird rather like a chicken, but stringier about its legs and with a stronger taste.

The lamb had bread soaked in hot water and brown sugar sprinkled on the top. He liked this very much and consented to let the two gypsy women feed him with it, as he sat on Anthea's lap. All that long hot afternoon, Robert and Cyril and Anthea and Jane had to keep the lamb amused and happy while the gypsies looked eagerly on.

By the time the shadows grew long and black across the meadows, he had really taken to the woman with the light hair, and even consented to kiss his hand to the children, and to stand up and bow with his hand on his chest like a gentleman to the two men. The whole gypsy camp was in raptures with him, and his brothers and sisters could not help taking some pleasure in showing off his accomplishments to an audience so interested and enthusiastic, but they longed for sunset. We're getting into the habit of longing for sunset, Cyril whispered, how I do wish we could wish something really sensible that would be of some use, so that we should be quite sorry when sunset came.

The shadows got longer and longer, and at last there were no separate shadows any more, but one soft glowing shadow over everything, for the sun was out of sight behind the hill, but he had not really set yet. The people who make the laws about lighting bicycle lamps are the people who decide when the sun sets. She has to do it too, to the minute, or they would know the reason why.

But the gypsies were getting impatient. Now, young'uns, the red handkerchief man said, it's time you were laying of your heads on your pillowses. So it is.

The kid's all right and friendly with us now, so you just hand him over and get home like you said. The women and children came crowding round the lamb. Arms were held out, fingers snapped invitingly, friendly faces beaming with admiring smiles, but all failed to tempt the loyal lamb.

He clung with arms and legs to Jane, who happened to be holding him, and uttered the gloomiest roar of the whole day. It's no good, the woman said. Hand the little puppet over, miss.

We'll soon quiet him. And still the sun would not set. Tell her about how to put him to bed, whispered Cyril.

Anything to gain time, and be ready to bolt when the sun really does make up its silly old mind to set. Yes, I'll hand him over in just one minute, Anthea began talking very fast. But do let me just tell you he has a warm bath every night and cold in the morning, and he has a crockery rabbit to go into the warm bath with him, and the little Samuel saying his prayers in white china on a red cushion for the cold bath.

And he hates you to wash his ears, but you must. And if you let the soap get into his eyes, the lamb— Lamb, kies, said he. He had stopped roaring to listen.

The woman laughed. As if I hadn't never bathed the babby, she said. Come, give us a hold of him.

Come to me, Liam, my precious. Quay, ugsy, replied the lamb at once. Yes, but, Anthea went on, about his meals, you really must let me tell you he has an apple or banana every morning, and bread and milk for breakfast, and an egg for his tea sometimes, and — I've brought up ten, said the black ring-littered woman.

Besides the others, come, miss, hand him over. I can't bear it no longer, I just must give him a hug. We ain't settled yet whose he's to be, Esther, said one of the men.

It won't be you, Esther, with seven of them at your tail already. I ain't so sure of that, said Esther's husband. And ain't I nobody to have a say neither, said the husband Amelia.

Zilla, the girl, said, and me, I'm a single girl, and no one but him to look after, I ought to have him. Hold your tongue! Shut your mouth! Don't you show me no more of your impurence! Everyone was getting very angry. The dark gypsy faces were frowning and anxious-looking.

Suddenly a change swept over them, as if some invisible sponge had wiped away these

cross and anxious expressions, and left only a blank. The children saw that the sun really had set, but they were afraid to move, and the gypsies were feeling so muddled because of the invisible sponge that had washed all the feelings of the last few hours out of their hearts that they could not say a word. The children hardly dared to breathe.

Suppose the gypsies, when they recovered speech, should be furious to think how silly they had been all day. It was an awkward moment. Suddenly Anthea, greatly daring, held out the lamb to the red-handkerchief man.

Here he is, she said. The man drew back. I shouldn't like to deprive you, miss, he said hoarsely.

Anyone who likes can have my share of him, said the other man. After all, I've got enough of my own, said Esther. He's a nice little chap, though, said Amelia.

She was the only one who now looked affectionately at the whimpering lamb. Zilla said, if I don't think I must have had a touch of the sun, I don't want him. Then shall we take him away, said Anthea.

Well, suppose you do, said Pharaoh heartily, and we'll say no more about it. And with great haste all the gypsies began to be busy about their tents for the night, all but Amelia. She went with the children as far as the bend in the road, and then she said, Let me give him a kiss, miss.

I don't know what made us go forth to behave so silly. Us gypsies don't steal babies, whatever they may tell you when you're naughty. We've enough of our own, mostly, but I've lost all mine.

She leaned towards the lamb, and he, looking in her eyes, unexpectedly put up a grubby soft paw and stroked her face. Paw, paw, said the lamb, and he let the gypsy woman kiss him, and what is more he kissed her brown cheek in return. A very nice kiss, as all his kisses are, and not a wet one like some babies give.

The gypsy woman moved her finger about on his forehead, as if she had been writing something there, and the same with his chest and his hands and his feet. Then she said, May he be brave and have the strong head to think with, and the strong heart to love with, and the strong arms to work with, and the strong feet to travel with, and always come safe home to his own. Then she said something in a strange language no one could understand, and suddenly added, Well, I must be saying so long, and glad to have made your acquaintance.

And she turned and went back to her home, the tent by the grassy roadside. The children looked after her till she was out of sight. Then Robert said, How silly of her, even sunset didn't put her right.

What rot she talked! Well, said Cyril, if you ask me, I think it was rather decent of her. Decent, said Anthea. It was very nice indeed of her.

I think she's a dear— She's just too frightfully nice for anything, said Jane. And they went home very late for tea, and unspeakably late for dinner. Martha scolded, of course, but the lamb was safe.

I say it turned out we wanted the lamb as much as anyone, said Robert later. Of course. But do you feel different about it now the sun's set? No, said all the others together.

Then it's lasted over sunset with us. No, it hasn't, Cyril explained. The wish didn't do anything to us.

We always wanted him with all our hearts when we were our proper selves. Only we were all pigs this morning, especially you, Robert. Robert bore this much with a strange calm.

I certainly thought I didn't want him this morning, said he. Perhaps I was a pig, but everything looked so different when we thought we were going to lose him. And that, my dear children, is the moral of this chapter.

I did not mean it to have a moral, but morals are nasty forward beings, and will keep putting in their oars where they are not wanted. And since the moral has crept in, quite against my wishes, you might as well think of it next time you feel piggy yourself and want to get rid of any of your brothers and sisters. I hope this doesn't often happen, but I dare say it has happened sometimes, even to you.