

# OpenTheo

## Five Children and It—Chapter 7: A Siege and Bed

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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 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! Somewhat 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 had an odd taste because they had been in Cyril's pocket all the morning with a hank of tarred twine, some green fur cones, and a ball of cobbler's wax.

Yes, but look here, squirrel, said Robert. You're so clever at explaining about invisibility and all that. How is it that 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 mouth 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... Hello? Cyril stood up with a grin of triumph, holding a square piece of bread in his mouth. It was quite real.

Everyone saw it. It is true that, directly, he bit a piece off, the rest vanished. But it was all right, because he knew he had it in his hand, though he could neither see nor feel it.

He took another bite from the air between his fingers, and it turned into bread as he bit. The next moment all the others were following his example and opening and shutting their mouths an inch or so from the bare-looking table. Robert captured a slice of mutton and... But I think I will draw a veil over the rest of this painful scene.

It is enough to say that they all had enough mutton, and that when Martha came to change the plates, she said she had never seen such a mess in all her born days. The pudding was, fortunately, a plain suet one, and in answer to Martha's questions, the children all with one accord said that they would not have molasses on it, nor jam, nor sugar. Just plain, please, they said.

Martha said, Well I never, what next, I wonder, and went away. Then ensued another scene on which I will not dwell, for nobody looks nice picking up slices of suet pudding from the table in its mouth like a dog. The great thing, after all, was that they had had dinner, and now everyone felt more courage to prepare for the attack that was to be delivered before sunset.

Robert, as captain, insisted on climbing to the top of one of the towers to Reconnoitre, so up they all went. And now they could see all round the castle, and could see too that beyond the moat, on every side, tents of the besieging party were pitched. Rather uncomfortable shivers ran down the children's backs, as they saw that all the men were very busy cleaning or sharpening their arms, restringing their bows, and polishing their shields.

A large party came along the road, with horses dragging along the great trunk of a tree, and Cyril felt quite pale, because he knew this was for a battering-ram. What a good

thing we've got a moat, he said, and what a good thing the drawbridge is up. I should never have known how to work it.

Of course it would be up in a besieged castle. You'd think there ought to have been soldiers in it, wouldn't you? said Robert. You see, you don't know how long it's been besieged, said Cyril darkly.

Perhaps many of the brave defenders were killed early in the siege, and all its provisions eaten, and now there are only a few intrepid survivors. That's us, and we are going to defend it to the death. How do you begin? Defending to the death, I mean? asked Anthea.

We ought to be heavily armed, and then shoot at them when they advance to the attack. They used to pour boiling lead down on besiegers when they got too close, said Anthea. Father showed me the holes on purpose for pouring it down through at Bodium Castle, and there are holes like it in the gate tower here.

I think I'm glad it's only a game. It is only a game, isn't it? said Jane. But no one answered.

The children found plenty of strange weapons in the castle, and if they were armed at all, it was soon plain that they would be, as Cyril said, armed heavily, for these swords and lances and crossbows were far too weighty even for Cyril's manly strength, and as for the longbows, none of the children could even begin to bend them. The daggers were better, but Jane hoped that the besiegers would not come close enough for daggers to be of any use. Never mind, we can hurl them like javelins, said Cyril, or drop them on people's heads.

I say there are lots of stones on the other side of the courtyard. If we took some of those up, just to drop on their heads if they were to try swimming the moat. So a heap of stones grew apace, up in the room above the gate, and another heap, a shiny, spiky, dangerous-looking heap of daggers and knives.

As Anthea was crossing the courtyard for more stones, a sudden and valuable idea came to her. She went to Martha and said, May we have just biscuits for tea? We're going to play at Perseid's Castles, and we'd like the biscuits to provision the garrison. Put mine in my pocket, please, my hands are so dirty, and I'll tell the others to fetch theirs.

This was indeed a happy thought, for now with four generous handfuls of air, which turned to biscuits as Martha crammed it into their pockets, the garrison was well provisioned till sundown. They brought up some iron pots of cold water to pour on the besiegers instead of hot lead, with which the castle did not seem to be provided. The afternoon passed with wonderful quickness.

It was very exciting, but none of them, except Robert, could feel all the time that this

was real, deadly, dangerous work. To the others, who had only seen the camp and the besiegers from a distance, the whole thing seemed half a game of make-believe, and half a splendidly distinct and perfectly safe dream. But it was only now and then that Robert could feel this.

When it seemed to be tea-time, the biscuits were eaten, with water from the deep well in the courtyard drunk out of horns. Cyril insisted on putting by eight of the biscuits, in case anyone should feel faint in stress of battle. Just as he was putting away the reserved biscuits in a sort of little stone cupboard without a door, a sudden sound made him drop three.

It was the loud, fierce cry of a trumpet. You see, it is real, said Robert, and they are going to attack. All rushed to the narrow windows.

Yes, said Robert, they're all coming out of their tents and moving about like ants. There's that jaykin dancing about where the bridge joins us. I wish he could see me put my tongue out at him.

Yaaah! The others were far too pale to wish to put their tongues out at anybody. They looked at Robert with surprised respect. Anthea said, You really are brave, Robert.

Rot! Cyril's pallor turned to redness now, all in a minute. He's been getting ready to be brave all the afternoon, and I wasn't ready, that's all. I shall be braver than he is in half a jiffy.

Oh dear, said Jane. What does it matter which of you is the bravest? I think Cyril was a perfect silly to wish for a castle, and I don't want to play. It isn't! Robert was beginning sternly, but Anthea interrupted.

Oh yes, you do, she said coaxingly. It's a very nice game, really, because they can't possibly get in, and if they do, the women and children are always spared by civilised armies. But are you quite, quite sure they are civilised? asked Jane, panting.

They seem to be such a long time ago. Of course they are, Anthea pointed cheerfully through the narrow window. Why, look at the little flags on their lances, how bright they are, and how fine the leader is.

Look, that's him, isn't it, Robert, on the grey horse? Jane consented to look, and the scene was almost too pretty to be alarming. The green turf, the white tents, the flash of pennant lances, the gleam of armour, and the bright colours of scarf and tunic. It was just like a splendid coloured picture.

The trumpets were sounding, and when the trumpeters stopped for breath, the children could hear the cling-clang of armour and the murmur of voices. A trumpeter came forward to the edge of the moat, which now seemed very much narrower than at first,

and blew the longest and loudest blast they had yet heard. When the blaring noise had died away, a man who was with the trumpeter shouted, What ho within there? And his voice came plainly to the garrison in the gatehouse.

Hello there, Robert bellowed back at once. In the name of our lord the king, and of our good lord and trusty leader Sir Wilfrid de Talbot, we summon this castle to surrender, on pain of fire and sword and no quarter. Do you surrender? No, bawled Robert.

Of course we don't. Never, never, never. The man answered back, Then your fate be on your own heads.

Cheer, said Robert in a fierce whisper, cheer to show them that we aren't afraid, and rattle the daggers to make more noise. One, two, three, hip-hip, hooray! Again, hip-hip, hooray! Once more, hip-hip, hooray! The cheers were rather high and weak, but the rattle of the daggers lent them strength and depth. There was another shout from the camp across the moat, and then the beleaguered fortress felt that the attack had indeed begun.

It was getting rather dark in the room above the great gate, and Jane took very little courage as she remembered that sunset couldn't be far off now. The moat is dreadfully thin, said Anthea, but they can't get into the castle even if they do swim over, said Robert. And as he spoke he heard feet on the stair outside, heavy feet and the clang of steel.

No one breathed for a moment. The steel and the feet went on up the turret stairs. Then Robert sprang softly to the door.

He pulled off his shoes. Wait here, he whispered, and stole quickly and softly after the boots and the spur clank. He peeped into the upper room.

The man was there, and it was Jakin, all dripping with moat water, and he was fiddling about with the machinery which Robert felt sure worked the drawbridge. Robert banged the door suddenly and turned the great key in the lock, just as Jakin sprung to the inside of the door. Then he tore down stairs and into the little turret at the foot of the tower where the biggest window was.

We ought to have defended this, he cried to the others as they followed him. He was just in time. Another man had swum over, and his fingers were on the window ledge.

Robert never knew how the man had managed to climb up out of the water, but he saw the clinging fingers and hit them as hard as he could with an iron bar that he caught up from the floor. The man fell with a splash into the moat water. In another moment Robert was outside the little room, had banged its door and was shooting home the enormous bolts and calling to Cyril to lend a hand.

Then they stood in the arched gatehouse, breathing hard and looking at each other. Jane's mouth was open. Cheer up, Jenny, said Robert.

It won't last much longer. There was a creaking above, and something rattled and shook. The pavement they stood on seemed to tremble.

Then a crash told them that the drawbridge had been lowered to its place. That's that beast, Jakin, said Robert. They're still the portcullis.

I'm almost certain that's worked from lower down. And now the drawbridge rang and echoed hollowly to the hoofs of horses and the tramp of armed men. Up, quick, cried Robert.

Let's drop things on them. Even the girls were feeling almost brave now. They followed Robert quickly and under his directions began to drop stones out through the long narrow windows.

There was a confused noise below and some groans. Oh dear, said Anthea, putting down the stone she was just going to drop out. I'm afraid we've hurt somebody.

Robert caught up the stone in a fury. I should hope we had, he said. I'd give something for a jolly good boiling kettle of lead.

Surrender indeed. And now came more tramping and a pause, and then the thundering thump of the battering ram, and the little room was almost pitch dark. We've held it, cried Robert.

We won't surrender. The sun must set in a minute. Here, they're all jarring underneath again.

Pity there's no time to get more stones. Here, pour that water down on them. It's no good of course, but they'll hate it.

Oh dear, said Jane, don't you think we'd better surrender? Never, said Robert. We'll have a parley if you like, but we'll never surrender. Oh, I'll be a soldier when I grow up.

You just see if I don't. I won't go into the civil service, whatever anyone says. Let's wave a handkerchief and ask for a parley, Jane pleaded.

I don't believe the sun's going to set tonight at all. Give them the water first, the brutes, said the bloodthirsty Robert. So Anthea tilted the pot over the nearest lead hole and poured.

They heard a splash below, but no one below seemed to have felt it, and again the ram battered the great door. Anthea paused. How idiotic, said Robert, lying flat on the floor and putting one eye to the lead hole.

Of course, the holes go straight down into the gatehouse. That's for when the enemy has got past the door and the portcullis, and almost all is lost. Here, hand me the pot.

He crawled on to the three-cornered window ledge in the middle of the wall, and taking the pot from Anthea, poured the water out through the arrow slit. And as he began to pour, the noise of the battering ram and the trampling of the foe and the shouts of, Surrender! And de Talbot forever! all suddenly stopped and went out like the snuff of a candle. The little dark room seemed to whirl round and turn topsy-turvy, and when the children came to themselves, there they were, safe and sound, in the big front bedroom of their own house, the house with the ornamental nightmare iron top to the roof.

They all crowded to the window and looked out. The moat and the tents and the besieging force were all gone, and there was the garden, with its tangle of dahlias and marigolds and asters and later roses and the spiky iron railings and the quiet white road. Everyone drew a deep breath.

And that's all right, said Robert. I told you so. And I say, we didn't surrender, did we? Aren't you glad now I wished for a castle? asked Cyril.

I think I am now, said Anthea slowly. But I wouldn't wish for it again, I think, squirreled dear. Oh, it was simply splendid, said Jane unexpectedly.

I wasn't frightened a bit. Oh, I say, Cyril was beginning, but Anthea stopped him. Look here, she said.

It's just come into my head. This is the very first thing we wished for that hasn't gotten us into a row. And there hasn't been the least little scrap of a row about this.

Nobody's raging downstairs. We're safe and sound. We've had an awfully jolly day, at least, not jolly exactly, but you know what I mean.

And we know now how brave Robert is. And Cyril too, of course, she added hastily. And Jane as well.

And we haven't got into a row with a single grown-up. The door was opened suddenly and fiercely. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, said the voice of Martha.

And they could tell by her voice that she was very angry indeed. I thought you couldn't last through the day without getting up to some mischief. A person can't take a breath of air on the front doorstep, but you must be emptying the water jug on their heads.

Off you go to bed, the lot of you, and try to get up better children in the morning. Now then, don't let me have to tell you twice. If I find any of you not in bed in ten minutes, I'll let you know it, that's all.

A new cap and everything. She flounced out amid a disregarded chorus of regrets and

apologies. The children were very sorry, but really it was not their fault.

You can't help it if you're pouring water on a besieging foe, and your castle suddenly changes into your house, and everything changes with it except the water, and that happens to fall on somebody else's clean cap. I don't know why the water didn't change into nothing though, said Cyril. Why should it? asked Robert.

Water's water all the world over. I expect the castle well was the same as ours in the stable yard, said Jane, and that really was the case. I thought we couldn't get through a wish day without a row, said Cyril.

It was much too good to be true. Come on, Bobbs, my military hero. If we lick into bed sharp she won't be so furious, and perhaps she'll bring us up some supper.

I'm jolly hungry. Good night, kids. Good night.

I hope the castle won't come creeping back in the night, said Jane. Of course it won't, said Anthea briskly, but Martha will, not in the night, but in a minute. Here, turn round.

I'll get that nod out of your pinafore strings. Wouldn't it have been degrading for Sir Wilfrid to tell, but, said Jane dreamily, if he could have known that half the Basid garrison wore pinafores, and the other half knickerbockers. Yes, frightfully.

Do stand still. You're only tightening the knot, said Anthea.