

# OpenTheo

## Five Children and It—Chapter 10: Scalps

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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 10. Scalps. Probably the day would have been a greater success if Cyril had not been reading *The Last of the Mohicans*.

The story was running in his head at breakfast, and as he took his third cup of tea he said dreamily, I wish there were red Indians in England. Not big ones, you know, but little ones, just about the right size for us to fight. Everyone disagreed with him at the time, and no one attached any importance to the incident.

But when they went down to the sandpit to ask for £100 and two shilling pieces with Queen Victoria's head on to prevent mistakes, which they had always felt to be a really reasonable wish that must turn out well, they found out that they had done it again. For the Samyad, which was very cross and sleepy, said, Oh, don't bother me, you've had your wish. I didn't know it, said Cyril.

Don't you remember yesterday? said the sand fairy, still more disagreeably. You asked me to let you have your wishes wherever you happen to be, and you wished this morning, and you've got it. Oh, have we? said Robert.

What is it? So you've forgotten, said the Samyad, beginning to burrow. Never mind, you'll know soon enough, and I wish you joy of it, a nice thing you've let yourselves in for. We always do it somehow, said Jane sadly, and now the odd thing was that no one could remember anyone's having wished for anything that morning.

The wish about the Red Indians had not stuck in anyone's head. It was a most anxious morning. Everyone was trying to remember what had been wished for, and no one could, and everyone kept expecting something awful to happen every minute.

It was most agitating. They knew from what the Samyad had said that they must have wished for something more than usually undesirable, and they spent several hours in most agonising uncertainty. It was not till nearly dinner time that Jane tumbled over the last of the Mohicans, which had of course been left face downwards on the carpet, and when Anthea had picked her and the book up, she suddenly said, I know, and sat down flat on the carpet.

Oh, pussy, how awful! It was Indians he wished for. Cyril, at breakfast, don't you remember? He said, I wish there were Red Indians in England. And now there are, and they're going about scalping people all over the country as likely as not.

Perhaps they're only in Northumberland and Durham, said Jane soothingly. It was almost impossible to believe that it could really hurt people much to be scalped so far away as that. Don't you believe it, said Anthea.

The Samyad said we'd let ourselves in for a nice thing. That means they'll come here. And suppose they scalp the lamb? Perhaps the scalping would come right again at sunset, said Jane.

But she did not speak so hopefully as usual. Not it, said Anthea. The things that grow out of the wishes don't go.

Look at the fifteen shillings. Pussy, I'm going to break something, and you must let me have every penny of money you've got. The Indians will come here.

Don't you see? That spiteful Samyad as good as said so. You see what my plan is. Come on.

Jane did not see at all, but she followed her sister meekly into Mother's bedroom. Anthea lifted down the heavy water jug. It had a pattern of stalks and long grasses on it, which Anthea never forgot.

She carried it into the dressing room and carefully emptied the water out of it into the bath. Then she took the jug back into the bedroom and dropped it on the floor. You know how a jug always breaks if you happen to drop it by accident.

If you happen to drop it on purpose, it is quite different. Anthea dropped that jug three times, and it was as unbroken as ever. So at last she had to take her father's boot tree and break the jug with that in cold blood.

It was heartless work. Next she broke open the missionary box with the poker. Jane told her that it was wrong, of course, but Anthea shut her lips very tight and then said, Don't be silly.

It's a matter of life and death. There was not very much in the missionary box, only seven and four pence, but the girls between them had nearly four shillings. This made over eleven shillings, as you will easily see.

Anthea tied up the money in a corner of her pocket handkerchief. Come on, Jane, she said, and ran down to the farm. She knew that the farmer was going into Rochester that afternoon.

In fact, it had been arranged that he was to take the four children with him. They had planned this in the happy hour when they believed that they were going to get that hundred pounds and two shilling pieces out of the Samoyed. They had arranged to pay the farmer two shillings each for the ride.

Now Anthea hastily explained to him that they could not go, but would he take Martha and the baby instead? He agreed, but was not pleased to get only half a crown instead of eight shillings. Then the girls ran home again. Anthea was agitated, but not flurried.

When she came to think it over afterwards, she could not help seeing that she had acted with the most far-seeing promptitude, just like a born general. She fetched a little box from her corner drawer and went to find Martha, who was laying the cloth and not in the best of tempers. Look here, said Anthea, I've broken the water jug in Mother's room.

Just like you, always up to some mischief, said Martha, dumping down a salt cellar with a bang. Don't be cross, Martha dear, said Anthea. I've got enough money to pay for a new one.

If only you'll be a dear and go and buy it for us. Your cousins keep a china shop, don't they? And I would like you to get it today, in case Mother comes home tomorrow. You know she said she might, perhaps.

But you're all going into town yourselves, said Martha. We can't afford to if we get the new jug, said Anthea. But we'll pay you to go, if you'll take the lamb.

And I say, Martha, look here, I'll give you my liberty box if you'll go. Look, it's most awfully pretty, all inlaid with real silver and ivory and ebony, like King Solomon's temple. I see, said Martha.

No, I don't want your box, miss. What you want is to get the precious lamb off your hands for the afternoon. Don't you go for to think I don't see through you.

This was so true that Anthea longed to deny it at once. Martha had no business to know so much. But she held her tongue.

Martha set down the bread with a bang that made it jump off its trencher. I do want the jug got, said Anthea softly. You will go, won't you? Well, just for this once I don't mind.

But mind you don't get into none of your outrageous mischief while I'm gone, that's all. He's going earlier than he thought, said Anthea eagerly. You'd better hurry and get dressed.

Do put on that lovely purple frock, Martha, and the hat with the pink cornflowers and the yellow lace collar. Jane'll finish laying the cloth, and I'll wash the lamb and get him ready. As she washed the unwilling lamb and hurried him into his best clothes, Anthea peeped out the window from time to time.

So far all was well. She could see no red Indians. When with a rush and a scurry and some deepening of the damask of Martha's complexion she and the lamb had been got off, Anthea drew a deep breath.

He's safe, she said, and to Jane's horror flung herself down on the floor and burst into floods of tears. Jane did not understand at all how a person could be so brave and like a general, and then suddenly give way and go flat like an air-balloon when you prick it. It is better not to go flat, of course, but you will observe that Anthea did not give way till her aim was accomplished.

She had got the deer lamb out of danger. She felt certain that the red Indians would be round the White House or nowhere. The farmer's cart would not come back till after sunset, so she could afford to cry a little.

It was partly with joy that she cried, because she had done what she meant to do. She cried for about three minutes, while Jane hugged her miserably and said at five-second intervals, Don't cry, Panther, dear. Then she jumped up, rubbed her eyes hard with the corner of her pinafore so that they kept red for the rest of the day, and started to tell the boys.

But just at that moment Cook rang the dinner bell, and nothing could be said till they had been helped to mince beef. Then Cook left the room and Anthea told her tale. But it is a mistake to tell a thrilling tale when people are eating minced beef and boiled potatoes.

There seemed somehow to be something about the food that made the idea of red Indians seem flat and unbelievable. The boys actually laughed and called Anthea a little

silly. Why, said Cyril, I'm almost sure it was before I said that that Jane said she wished it would be a fine day.

It wasn't, said Jane briefly. Why, if it was Indians, Cyril went on, salt please and mustard. I must have something to make this mush go down.

If it was Indians, they'd have been infesting the place long before this. You know they would. I believe it's the fine day.

Then why did the Samoyed say we'd let ourselves in for a nice thing? asked Anthea. She was feeling very cross. She knew she had acted with nobility and discretion, and after that it was very hard to be called a little silly, especially when she had the weight of a burglaried missionary box and about seven and fourpence, mostly in coppers, lying like lead upon her conscience.

There was a silence, during which Cook took away the mincey plates and brought in the pudding. As soon as she had retired, Cyril began again. Of course I don't mean to say, he admitted, that it wasn't a good thing to get Martha and the lamb out of the way for the But as for Red Indians, why, you know jolly well the wishes always come that very minute.

If there was going to be Red Indians, they'd be here now. I expect they are, said Anthea. They're lurking amid the undergrowth for anything you know.

I do think you're most unkind. Indians almost always do lurk, really though, don't they? put in Jane, anxious for peace. No they don't, said Cyril tartly, and I'm not unkind, I'm only truthful, and I say it was utter rot breaking the water jug, and as for the missionary box, I believe it's a treason crime, and I shouldn't wonder if you could be hanged for it, if any of us was to split.

Shut up, can't you? said Robert, but Cyril couldn't. You see he felt in his heart that if there should be Indians, they would be entirely his fault, so he did not wish to believe in them, and trying not to believe things when in your heart you're almost sure they are true, is as bad for the temper as anything I know. It's simply idiotic, he said, talking about Indians when you can see for yourself that it's Jane who got her wish.

Look what a fine day it is! Oh! He had turned towards the window to point out the fineness of the day. The others turned too, and a frozen silence caught at Cyril, and none of the others felt at all like breaking it, for there peering round the corner of the window, among the red leaves of the Virginia creeper, was a face, a brown face with a long nose and a tight mouth and very bright eyes, and the face was painted in coloured patches. It had long black hair, and in the hair were feathers.

Every child's mouth in the room opened, and stayed open. The pudding was growing white and cold on their plates. No one could move.

Suddenly the feathered head was cautiously withdrawn, and the spell was broken. I'm sorry to say that Anthea's first words were very like a girl. There now, she said, I told you so.

The pudding had now definitely ceased to charm. Hastily wrapping their portions in the spectator of the week before the week before last, they hid them behind the crinkled paper stove ornament, and fled upstairs to reconnoitre, and to hold a hurried council. Pax, said Cyril handsomely when they reached their mother's bedroom.

Panther, I'm sorry if I was a brute. All right, said Anthea, but you see now— No further trace of Indians, however, could be discerned from the windows. Well, said Robert, what are we to do? The only thing I can think of, said Anthea, who was now generally admitted to be the heroine of the day, is if we dressed up as like Indians as we can, and looked out of the windows, or even went out, they might think we were the powerful leaders of a large neighbouring tribe, and not do anything to us, you know, for fear of awful vengeance.

But Eliza and the cook, said Jane— You forget they can't notice anything, said Robert. They wouldn't notice anything after the way, even if they were scalped or roasted at a slow fire. But would they come right at sunset? Of course, you can't be really scalped or burned to death without noticing it, and you'd be sure to notice it next day, even if it escaped your attention at the time, said Cyril.

I think Anthea's right, but we shall want a most awful lot of feathers. I'll go down to the hen-house, said Robert. There's one of the turkeys in there.

It's not very well. I could cut its feathers without it minding much. It's very bad, doesn't seem to care what happens to it.

Get me the cutting-out scissors. Ernest Rechenoytering convinced them all that no Indians were in the poultry yard. Robert went.

In five minutes he came back, pale, but with many feathers. Look here, he said. This is jolly serious.

I cut off the feathers, and when I turned to come out there was an Indian squinting at me from under the old hen-coop. I just brandished the feathers and yelled, and got away before he could get the coop off top of himself. Panther, get the coloured blankets off our beds, and look slippy, can't you? It is wonderful how like an Indian you can make yourself with blankets and feathers and coloured scarves.

Of course, none of the children happened to have long black hair, but there was a lot of black calico that had been brought to cover schoolbooks with. They cut strips of this into a sort of fine fringe and fashioned it round their heads with the amber-coloured ribbons off the girls' Sunday dresses. Then they stuck turkey's feathers in the ribbons.

The calico looked very like long black hair, especially when the strips began to curl up a bit. But our faces, said Anthea, they're not at all the right colour, we're all rather pale, and I'm sure I don't know why but Cyril is the colour of putty. I'm not, said Cyril.

The real Indians outside seem to be brownish, said Robert hastily. I think we ought to be really red. It's sort of superior to have a red skin if you are one.

The red ochre Cook uses for the kitchen bricks seemed to be about the reddest thing in the house. The children mixed some in a saucer with milk, as they had seen Cook do for the kitchen flour. Then they carefully painted each other's faces and hands with it, till they were quite as red as any red Indian need be, if not redder.

They knew at once that they must look very terrible, when they met Eliza in the passage, and she screamed aloud. This unsolicited testimonial pleased them very much, hastily telling her not to be a goose, and that it was only a game. The four blanketed, feathered, really and truly red skins went boldly out to meet the foe.

I say boldly, that is because I wish to be polite. At any rate, they went. Along the hedge dividing the wilderness from the garden was a row of dark heads, all highly feathered.

It's our only chance, whispered Anthea, much better than to wait for their blood-freezing attack. We must pretend like mad. Like that game of cards where you pretend you've got aces when you haven't.

Fluffing, they call it, I think. Now then, whoop. With four wild war-whoops, or as near them as white children could be expected to go without any previous practice, they rushed through the gate and struck four warlike attitudes in face of the line of red Indians.

These were all about the same height, and that height was Cyril's. I hope to goodness they can talk English, said Cyril through his attitude. Anthea knew they could, though she never knew how she came to know it.

She had a white towel tied to a walking stick. This was a flag of truce, and she waved it, in the hope that the Indians would know what it was. Apparently they did, for one who was browner than the others stepped forward.

You seek a powwow, he said in excellent English. I am Golden Eagle, of the mighty tribe of Rock Dwellers. And I, said Anthea with a sudden inspiration, am the Black Panther, chief of the Mazawati tribe.

My brothers, I don't mean, yes I do, the tribe, I mean the Mazawatis, are in ambush below the brow of Yonder Hill. And what mighty warriors be these? Asked Golden Eagle, turning to the others. Cyril said that he was the great chief squirrel, of the Mning Kongo tribe, and seeing that Jane was sucking her thumb, and could evidently think of no name

for herself, he added, this great warrior is Wildcat, Pussy for Ox, we call it in this land, leader of the vast Fetizi tribe.

And thou, Valorous Redskin, Golden Eagle inquired suddenly of Robert, who taken unawares could only reply that he was Bobbs, leader of the Cape Mounted Police. And now, said Black Panther, our tribes, if we just whistle them up, will far outnumber your puny forces, so resistance is useless. Return therefore to your land, oh brother, and smoke pipes of peace in your wampums, with your squaws and your medicine men, and dress yourselves in the gayest wigwams, and eat happily of the juicy fresh caught moccasins.

You've got it all wrong, murmured Cyril angrily, but Golden Eagle only looked inquiringly at her. Thy customs are other than ours, oh Black Panther, he said. Bring up thy tribe, that we may hold Pow Wow and State before them, as becomes great chiefs.

We'll bring them up right enough, said Anthea, with their bows and arrows and tomahawks and scalping knives, and everything you can think of, if you don't look sharp and go. She spoke bravely enough, but the hearts of all the children were beating furiously, and their breath came in shorter and shorter gasps, for the little real Red Indians were closing up round them, coming nearer and nearer with angry murmurs, so that they were the centre of a crowd of dark cruel faces. It's no go, whispered Robert.

I knew it wouldn't be. We must make a bolt for the Samyad. It might help us.

If it doesn't—well, I suppose we shall come alive again at sunset. I wonder if scalping hurts as much as they say. I'll wave the flag again, said Anthea.

If they stand back, we'll run for it. She waved the towel, and the chief commanded his followers to stand back. Then, charging wildly at the place where the line of Indians was thinnest, the four children started to run.

Their first rush knocked down some half-dozen Indians, over whose blanketed bodies the children leaped, and made straight for the sandpit. This was no time for the safe, easy way by which carts go down. Right over the edge of the sandpit they went, among the yellow and pale purple flowers and dried grasses, past the little bank martin's little front doors, skipping, clinging, bounding, stumbling, sprawling, and finally rolling.

Yellow Eagle and his followers came up with them just at the very spot where they had seen the Samyad that morning. Breathless and beaten, the wretched children now awaited their fate. Sharp knives and axes gleamed round them, but worse than these was the cruel light in the eyes of Golden Eagle and his followers.

You have lied to us, O Black Panther of the Masowatties, and thou too, Squirrel of the Moneeng Kongos, these also Pussy-Furocks of the Fetizi, and Bobs of the Cape-Mounted Police. These also have lied to us, if not with their tongues, yet by their silence. You have



lied under the cover of the truce flag of the Paleface.

You have no followers. Your tribes are far away. Following the hunting trail, what shall be their doom? he concluded, turning with a bitter smile to the other Red Indians.

Build we the fire, shouted his followers, and at once a dozen ready volunteers started to look for fuel. The four children, each held between two strong little Indians, cast despairing glances round them. Oh, if they could only see the Samyad! Do you mean to scalp us first and then roast us? asked Anthea desperately.

Of course! Redskin opened his eyes at her. It's always done. The Indians had formed a ring round the children, and now sat on the ground gazing at their captives.

There was a threatening silence. Then slowly, by twos and threes, the Indians who had gone to look for firewood came back, and they came back empty-handed. They had not been able to find a single stick of wood for a fire.

No one ever can, as a matter of fact, in that part of Kent. The children took a deep breath of relief, but it ended in a moan of terror, for bright knives were being brandished all about them. Next moment each child was seized by an Indian.

Each closed its eyes and tried not to scream. They waited for the sharp agony of the knife. It did not come.

Next moment they were released and fell in a trembling heap. Their heads did not hurt at all. They only felt strangely cool.

Wild war-woots rang in their ears. When they ventured to open their eyes, they saw four of their foes dancing round them with wild leaps and screams, and each of the four brandished in his hand a scalp of long-flowing black hair. They put their hands to their heads.

Their own scalps were safe. The poor, untutored savages had indeed scalped the children, but they had only, so to speak, scalped them up the black calico ringlets. The children fell into each other's arms, sobbing and laughing.

Their scalps are ours, chanted the chief. Ill-rooted were their ill-fated hairs. They came off in the hands of the victors without struggle, without resistance.

They yielded their scalps to the conquering rock-dwellers. Oh, how little a thing is a scalp so lightly won! They'll take our real ones in a minute, you see, if they don't, said Robert, trying to rub some of the red ochre off his face and hands onto his hair. Cheated of our just and fiery revenge are we, the chant went on.

But there are other torments than the scalping knife and the flames. Yet is the slow fire the correct thing. Oh, strange, unnatural country, wherein a man may find no wood to

burn his enemy.

Ah, for the boundless forests of my native land, where the great trees for thousands of miles grow but to furnish firewood wherewithal to burn our foes. Ah, would we were but in our native forest once more. Suddenly, like a flash of lightning, the golden gravel shone all round the four children instead of the dusky figures.

For every single Indian had vanished on the instant at their leader's word. The Samyad must have been there all the time, and it had given the Indian chief his wish. Martha brought home a jug, with a pattern of stalks and long grasses on it.

Also she brought back all Anthea's money. My cousin, she gave me the jug for luck. She said it was an odd one what the basenob had got smashed.

Oh, Martha, you are a dear, sighed Anthea, throwing her arms round her. Yes, giggled Martha. You'd better make the most of me while you've got me.

I shall give your ma notice directly minute she comes back. Oh, Martha, we haven't been so very horrid to you, have we? asked Anthea aghast. Oh, it isn't that, miss, Martha giggled more than ever.

I'm a-going to be married. It's Beale, the gamekeeper. He's been proposing to me off and on ever since you came home from the clergyman's where you got locked up on the church tower.

And today I said the word and made him a happy man. Anthea put the seven and four pence back in the missionary box and pasted paper over the place where the poker had broken it. She was very glad to be able to do this, and she does not know to this day whether breaking open a missionary box is or is not a hanging matter.