

Edith Nesbit
FIVE CHILDREN AND IT

Read by **Anna Bentinck**



1	Our house was three miles from the station,	2:56
2	Before Anthea and Cyril and the others had been a week in the country	3:39
3	The children stood round the hole,	3:03
4	The sand-fairy smoothed his long rat-like whiskers	3:51
5	'Just one more, please'	3:32
6	Baby was just waking when they got to him.	2:40
7	It was a horrible afternoon.	2:40
8	Anthea woke in the morning	3:41
9	On the road they turned and looked back	4:08
10	And now the children began to see	3:10
11	The children stood huddled together like frightened sheep	3:54
12	The morning after, the children awoke	3:31
13	It was settled that, as soon as they had wished for the money	3:32
14	'We may as well get along home', said Robert	3:09
15	So they took courage	3:36
16	The shadows got longer and longer	4:05
17	The next day was very hot indeed.	3:34
18	Anthea was late for breakfast.	3:28
19	They tried several other farms	3:20
20	Everything was carried up to the top of the tower	3:05
21	There was a pause.	2:48
22	So Andrew fetched the lantern and the cook's cousin	3:16
23	The vicar had sunk into a chair	3:16
24	Martha was obliged to keep the children indoors the next day for a punishment.	3:01

25	The leader was exactly like the pictures	3:03
26	He found the fairy.	4:49
27	The great thing, after all, was they they had had dinner	3:36
28	'We ought to have defended THIS!'	3:20
29	'Look here' said Cyril	3:48
30	It was not a happy party that flung itself down in the sand	3:21
31	There were some swings	3:49
32	Then began a very strange and wonderful afternoon	3:10
33	'Look here' said Cyril	3:24
34	Cyril had once pointed out that ordinary life	3:10
35	The Lamb – the original little tiresome beloved Lamb	3:03
36	This was really rather noble of Cyril	2:59
37	When he had mended the bicycle	3:12
38	Probably the day would have been a greater success	3:19
39	There was not very much in the missionary box	3:37
40	It is wonderful how like an Indian you can make yourselves	3:04
41	Golden Eagle and his followers came up with them	4:15
42	At breakfast two things happened	3:21
43	So up she went, took off her bonnet and went to the dressing table	3:17
44	When Martha had gone	3:24
45	'Before we go further, will you wish something for me?'	4:01

Total time: 2:33:57





Edith Nesbit, one of England's best-known classic children's writers, wrote over 100 novels and books of poetry, though where she found the time – with six children, two husbands, and a busy social and politically active life – is difficult to imagine.

And though she grew up in the middle of the 19th century, when families generally stayed in one spot, Edith – or Daisy as she was called by everyone – found herself travelling almost constantly, encountering different countries, different languages, different schools. Yet in this unsettled childhood, she managed to let her imagination grow, with ideas for stories and characters of children and adults which she stored away. Later they became the characters in *The Railway Children*, *The Treasure Seekers*, *The Wouldbegoods* and *Five Children and It*.

Edith Nesbit was born on 15 August 1858, the youngest child of Sarah and John Collis Nesbit, an agricultural chemist. She had two brothers, Henry and Alfred, one sister, Mary, and a half-sister, Sarah. The first four years of her life were happy, but then tragedy struck. Her father died suddenly when she was four, and, four years later, her sister Mary was diagnosed with



tuberculosis, a common but dangerous disease at that time. There was no cure except to move to a warmer, dryer climate, and so began Edith's life of constant change.

Between 1866 and 1872, Edith went to almost a dozen different schools in England, France and Germany. Some were harsh boarding schools where Edith was lonely and sad. In her audiobiography she recalls being placed alone and hungry in cold schoolrooms in the middle of winter; but at other times, as her mother travelled around the south of France with her three girls (the boys had been left at boarding schools in England), there were often periods without formal schooling.



Edith loved the countryside. She recalls one holiday-time at a house found by her mother at Dinan in Brittany called La Haye where the whole family gathered. This is how Edith remembered arriving her first day there:

"Up a hill wound the road, a steep wooded slope on one side, and on the other side a high, clay bank set with dainty ferns. Here and there a tiny spring trickled down to join the little stream that ran beside the road... The cart turned in at a wooden gate. We followed along the carriage-drive which ran along outside the high red wall of the big garden, then through a plantation of huge horse chestnut trees. To the left, I could see ricks, cows and pigs, all the bustle and colour of a farm-yard. Two great brown gates swung back on their hinges and we passed through them into the courtyard of the dearest home of my childhood. The courtyard was square. One side was formed by the house; dairy, coach-house and the chicken-house formed the second side; on the third were stable, cow-house and goat-shed; on the fourth, wood-shed, dog-kennel and the great gates by which we had entered. The house itself was an ordinary white-washed, slate-roofed, French country house, with an immense walled fruit garden on the other side of it. That summer



was an ideally happy one. My Mother had allowed us to run wild; we were expected to appear at meals with some approach to punctuality, and with hands and faces moderately clean. Sometimes when visitors were expected, we were seized and scrubbed, and clothed, and made to look something like the good little children we were not..."

La Haye, and the happy times spent there, was to form the background for *The Wouldbegoods*.

In 1871, Mary died of tuberculosis and the family returned home to a more settled life at Halstead Hall in Kent on the North Downs. For Edith, the countryside with its woods and hills, was perfect. Now 13, she started to write poems and stories in secret.

When she was 17, she decided to show her work to her mother, and this resulted in the first publication of a poem in a magazine. It was the beginning of a busy writing career. She married Hubert Bland in 1880, and the first of her children was born that year. Hubert encouraged – and was often closely involved in – her writing, and

by the 1890s books were coming out in a regular stream. The couple moved in key literary and political circles, counting George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells among their friends, but by now Edith herself was a widely admired writer.

Her lasting fame has been established by a handful of the novels, led, of course, by *The Railway Children* (1906) – and this was helped by a couple of enduringly popular films. Then there are the two Bastables

novels, *The Story of the Treasure-Seekers* (1899) and *The Wouldbegoods* (1901).

There are three Psammead novels, starting with *Five Children and It* (1902), which was followed by *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904) and *The Story of the Amulet* (1906). But she also wrote many other works, including junior introductions to the plays of Shakespeare. She died in 1924.

Notes by Nicolas Soames





Original illustrations by H.R. Miller

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Edith Nesbit

FIVE CHILDREN AND IT

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A group of children go out to play one day in old gravel pits and come across a sand-fairy – Psammead. “Its’ eyes were on long horns like a snail’s eyes, and it could move them in and out like telescopes; it had ears like a bat’s ears, and its tubby body was shaped like a spider’s and covered with thick, soft fur; its’ legs and arms were furry too, and it had hands and feet like a monkey’s.”

The unusual sand-fairy grants the children one wish a day, each lasting until sunset. Though wishes can come true, they are not always as pleasant as they might seem, which the children soon discover.



Anna Bentinck was trained at The Arts Educational School and has made over 800 broadcasts for BBC radio. Animation voices include the series *64 Zoo Lane*, and on TV she has played Mary Dickens in *Charles Dickens* and Mary Rutherford in the *Marie Curie* series. Her many audio books range from ‘*Lyra’s Oxford*’ by Philip Pullman and ‘*A Little Death*’ by Laura Wilson to ‘*Queen Victoria*’ by Evelyn Anthony.

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