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Opening extract from

Five Children on the Western Front

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In the old days when death
Stalked the world
For the flower of men,
And the rose of beauty faded
And pined in the great gloom.

ISAAC ROSENBERG,
Killed in Action April 1918

'The children were not particularly handsome, nor were they extra clever, nor extraordinarily good. But they were not bad sorts on the whole; in fact, they were rather like you.'

E. NESBIT, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*

PROLOGUE

LONDON, 1905

'I TURN MY BACK FOR ONE MINUTE, and you're pulling my house apart at the seams! For pity's sake find *something* quiet to do – something that doesn't break your necks!' Old Nurse looked crossly at the maid, who was giggling. 'Come on, Ivy. Don't encourage them.' Over her shoulder she added, 'And put your clothes on!'

The trouble started when it was too wet for the children to go out. Cyril said that the alcoves on the large, dingy staircase looked as if they were supposed to have statues in them, so he and his brother stripped down to their long white underwear and stood in the alcoves pretending to be statues, and Anthea and Jane laughed so hard they had to cling to the banisters. But then Robert started doing fancy poses and fell out

of his alcove onto the stairs with a terrifying crash, which brought Old Nurse and Ivy the maid rushing up from the basement kitchen.

'So now we'll have to think of something else,' Robert said, buttoning his shirt in the wrong holes. 'Let's wake up you-know-who.'

'He'll be cross,' Anthea warned. 'He'll say we haven't let him sleep long enough.' You-know-who was technically an 'it', but the children had fallen into the habit of calling it 'him' – as Jane said, 'It' sounded too much like a thing instead of a creature.

'I don't care – he should be grateful to us, for saving him from that horrible pet shop.'

The four brothers and sisters were staying at Old Nurse's while their parents and baby brother were abroad. Old Nurse (who had once been Father's nanny) lived in a big sooty slab of a house in the middle of London, near the British Museum. It was a lodging house, but the only other lodger was a grey-haired professor, who never minded about the noise they made – he'd even let them drag him into the game they had with You-Know-Who.

Cyril was a handsome, adventurous boy of twelve. Anthea, aged eleven, was kind, and liked looking after

people. Robert, aged nine, was serious with flashes of silliness, and seven-year-old Jane was a thoughtful, sharp-eyed little girl who worked hard at keeping up with the others. They were all thin and wiry, with light brown hair and brown eyes. Robert and Jane had freckles. The boys wore suits of heavy tweed; the girls wore white pinafores over their dresses. They were all fond of Old Nurse, but it was sad without Mother and Father and the Lamb (their name for the baby because his first word had been 'baaa'), and that was why they were playing with magic again. You-Know-Who had a way of finding them when things were sad, or upset in any way.

He had first appeared two summers ago, in the garden of a house in Kent where they were staying. After that they had moved to Camden Town in London and briefly met him during another magical adventure with a phoenix. This time they had found the creature on sale in a pet shop, and smuggled him back to Old Nurse's, where he lived under Anthea's bed in a tin bath full of fine sand.

The four of them squeezed into the girls' small attic bedroom, and Anthea dragged the heavy tin bath out onto the rug. After carefully checking that her hands

were perfectly dry (the smallest hint of damp made him feel ill), she gently dug into the sand to wake him.

His eyes came out first. They were on long stalks, like a snail's eyes, and he could move them in and out like telescopes.

'What is it now?' His mouth appeared next, like a little furry funnel sticking out of a pie-crust. 'Why can't you leave me in peace?'

He – or 'it' - was called a Psammead (you pronounced it 'Sammy-ad') and he was an ancient sand-fairy. The really amazing thing was that he had the power to grant wishes. These wishes only lasted until sunset, which was probably a good thing since they had wished themselves into some very awkward situations. But the hair-raising moments hadn't put them off – as Cyril said, practically anything was better than hanging about before tea on a rainy afternoon.

'We're so sorry if we woke you.' Anthea said, in her politest voice, because you had to take such care not to offend him. 'But we've got a bit of time before tea, and we wondered if we could have another trip into the future – only not so far this time.'

The smooth sand heaved and shifted, and out came the whole Psammead. His ears were large and soft,

like a bat's ears, his round body was like a little fat cushion of fur, and he had long, skinny arms and legs.

'Oh, all right.' When in a reasonable mood the Psammead enjoyed an adventure as much as anyone. 'Bring my carrier.'

Anthea and Jane had spent days making a special Psammead-carrier – by cutting up their party-dresses, which Old Nurse didn't yet know about. They were not very good at sewing, but their untidy stitches were strong. Anthea helped the Psammead into his bag and slung it over her shoulder. He weighed about three and a half pounds, and his sandy brown fur smelt distantly of the hot desert where he had been born, thousands of years ago.

'We wish we could go to the future,' Cyril said, 'but somewhere quite near, please.'

'Very well, as long as you don't complain about it later,' the Psammead said, in his peevish, dusty-sounding voice. 'And as long as you leave me alone for at least two days afterwards.'

He held his breath, and his plump body swelled up, as it did whenever he granted a wish, until the bag strained at the seams.

And suddenly they were in another place.

The Psammead had taken them to some very strange places. This was quite an ordinary-looking room, however, crammed with old books and statues, and photographs in silver frames. A very old man with white hair dozed at a heaped mahogany desk.

'Well, I don't think much of this,' Cyril said disgustedly. 'I was hoping for an adventure.' Cyril was going to be a famous explorer when he grew up – the sort you saw pictures of in magazines, hacking through jungles and hunting rare beasts. His favourite book was called 'With Rod and Gun Through Bechuanaland'.

'Look!' Anthea went closer to the dozing old man. 'It's our professor – only he's years and years older!'

They all gathered round his chair.

'He's so – so crinkled,' whispered Jane.

'No wonder,' said the Psammead. 'I've brought you forward twenty-five years. This is 1930.'

'Crikey,' Cyril said. 'I know we've been in the distant future before – but this is OUR future. If it's 1930, that means I'm thirty-seven years old. Maybe we should go and find ourselves, to see what we look like now.'

'I wonder if I married a vet, like I wanted,' Jane said. She loved nursing injured animals, though she

wasn't very good at accepting when they were dead, and had been in trouble for digging them up again.

'Shh,' Anthea said, 'He's waking up.' She patted the old professor's arm. 'Don't worry, Jimmy – it's only us.' 'Jimmy' was the name they had made up for the professor when he was swept into the magic; they never used it normally. 'We're on a visit from twenty-five years ago.'

He opened his eyes and his wrinkled face creased into a delighted smile. 'More dreams – old age is full of dreams. Hello, my dears. How charming, to dream about those happy days.' He stared into their faces for a long time. 'What a difference you made to that dull old house! The noise and the laughter!' Very gently, with a shaking hand, he stroked Anthea's hair. 'And here's kind little Anthea, who made me eat my dinner!'

'I hope you're better at looking after yourself these days,' Anthea said.

'I wish could dream you more often. You're grown up now, and it's not the same.'

Jane had started looking curiously at the swarm of photographs. Most were of dull adults in odd hats. 'Oh – I've found a picture of us – but when was this taken?'

It was a picture of the five of them, with the Lamb sitting on Anthea's knee.

'You sent it to me in the Christmas of 1905,' said the professor.

'Next Christmas – so it hasn't been taken yet.' Cyril frowned at it. 'I look stupid. When it does get taken I must remember not to make that face.'

'It means we'll get the Lamb back, safe and sound,' Anthea said, beaming. 'Just the happy ending we wanted.'

'Happy ending?' the professor echoed dreamily, as if talking to himself. 'Yes, there were still happy endings in those days.'

Jane asked, 'Are there any more pictures of us?'

'They're all pictures of you, my dear – you became my family.'

'I say!' Robert called from the window. 'The street's full of motor cars! Does everyone have a motor car in 1930?'

Cyril hurried over to look; both boys were fascinated by motor cars, and dreamed of driving them. The cars down in the street were long and sleek, and moved like the wind.

'I'm cold,' the Psammead announced. 'And the

sensors at the extreme ends of my whiskers are simply screaming damp. Take me back to my sand.'

'Don't!' the old professor sighed. 'Don't let me undream you just yet!'

'It's been a lovely visit, but I suppose we'd better go,' Anthea said. 'Old Nurse will get even crosser if we're late.' She kissed the professor's papery cheek. 'Bye, Jimmy.'

And then they were back in the girls' bedroom in 1905, and the bell was ringing for tea.

'My hat!' said Cyril. 'Did you see the blue one with the open top? That's the one I mean to drive in 1930.'

Robert said, 'Yes, that would be something like an adventure. If the future's full of motor cars, I can't wait!'

'I wish I'd had more time to look at the photographs of us in the future,' Anthea said thoughtfully, dropping the Psammead into his bath of sand. 'I saw a couple of pictures of ladies who looked a bit like Mother, and might have been me or Jane. But I didn't see any grown-up men who looked a bit like you boys – I wonder why not.'

Far away in 1930, in his empty room, the old professor was crying.

One

NINE YEARS LATER

KENT OCTOBER 1914

THE SAND AT THE BOTTOM OF the gravel pit shifted and heaved, and out popped the furry brown head of a most extraordinary creature. His eyes were long stalks, like the horns of a snail, and they shot out to stare at the astonished faces of the Lamb and Edie. It was a grey, blustery day in October; the two youngest children had come to the large, sandy hollow at the bottom of the garden to escape from the fussing inside the house while lunch was being made.

For a moment, they stared at each other in breathless silence.

The creature's whiskers quivered. 'What is the meaning of this? Where am I?'

'It spoke!' whispered Edie. 'Did you hear?'

'I think this must be a dream,' the Lamb said slowly.

‘But I have an odd feeling I’ve seen an animal like this before – maybe in another dream – ’

‘I am NOT an animal!’ the creature snapped. ‘I’m a senior sand fairy – and you have blundered into my sacred sleeping place. Well, it must have been a mistake, so I’ll forgive you. Shut the door on your way out.’

‘This is our garden,’ Edie said, wondering why she wasn’t frightened. ‘It doesn’t have a door.’

‘I don’t understand. I should be asleep in the baking sands of the desert, and this place is freezing my blood to a sorbet!’ He shivered and wrapped his long arms around his stout little body.

Edie and the Lamb stared at his peculiar little pucker of a mouth, his sprawling arms and legs and swivelling eyes, and felt a strange stirring in their deepest memories.

‘It’s the Psammead!’ the Lamb cried out suddenly, his freckled face glowing with excitement. ‘Edie, it’s him – from all the stories!’

‘But Anthea just made those up,’ Edie said doubtfully. ‘Didn’t she?’

‘I think I sort of knew the stories were real. I think I almost remember the Psammead – but last time he came I was only a baby.’

‘And I wasn’t even born.’ Edie was annoyed. ‘Everything interesting happened before I was born. It’s not fair. I hate being the youngest!’

‘Anthea,’ the Psammead said slowly. ‘One of the little girls I used to know was called Anthea.’

‘She’s not a little girl now,’ Edie said. ‘She’s twenty and she goes to art school.’

‘Art school? What’s that?’

‘It’s where you learn to be an artist. She draws people with no clothes on.’

‘I simply don’t understand,’ the Psammead said. ‘What strange civilisation is this? Why have I shot back into the future? Where on earth am I?’

‘I’m surprised you don’t recognise it,’ the Lamb said. ‘You’ve been here before. This is the White House in Kent; we moved back here when I was little. We’re in the famous gravel pit where you first appeared.’

‘But – but – ’ the Psammead’s long whiskers stiffened with alarm. ‘You’re the wrong children! Where are MY children?’

‘You mean our big brothers and sisters,’ the Lamb said. ‘Cyril, Anthea, Robert and Jane – they’re all here – and I’m the Lamb.’

'What – you?' The Psammead was bewildered. 'Nonsense, the Lamb is only a baby – a very sticky, grizzly baby, as I recall.'

The Lamb chuckled. 'I've grown a bit since then. I'm eleven now, and I'm a day scholar at St Anselm's. It's 1914.'

'Nineteen hundred and fourteen BC!' the Psammead sighed. 'I swore I'd have nothing more to do with this GHASTLY new century. If you're the Lamb, who is this freckly little girl?'

'I'm Edie, short for Edith.' Edie was so enchanted by the Psammead's cross, faraway voice that she didn't mind being called 'freckly'. 'I'm nine; I wasn't born when you had all those adventures.' Now that she was getting over the first shock, Edie was starting to realise how wonderful this was – the stories she had loved so much when she was little had come to life. 'I've always wished I could see you and talk to you, and you're so sweet – may I stroke you?'

'Hmmm.' The Psammead was vain and (as the others could have told them) fond of compliments. For the first time, there was a hint of a smile around the furry lips. 'If you must, but please ensure that your hands are completely DRY; if I come into contact with

the smallest drop of moisture, I'm poorly for weeks.'

'I'll wipe them on my skirt to be sure.' Edie carefully wiped her hands on the skirt of her blue sailor dress, and reached out to stroke the Psammead's little round ball of a head. His fur was as soft as mist and as dry as the desert.

'You have a nice gentle touch,' the Psammead said. 'You rather remind me of Anthea.'

'Poor thing, you're shivering; would you like to sit in my lap?'

'I suppose that might help.'

To Edie's great delight, the sand fairy allowed her to pick him up – he was heavier than he looked, and his body was lukewarm. She sat him carefully on her lap, wrapping the skirt of her dress around his shoulders.

'If you're real and not a story after all,' she said, 'that means the magic adventures were real too, doesn't it? Please could I have a go at flying, like the others did?' This story had always been Edie's favourite. 'When I was little Anthea drew a picture of me with wings, just like they had. And I wished and wished it was true.'

'They made rather a mess of having wings,' the Lamb said, grinning. 'Don't you remember? They forgot the magic ran out at sunset, and ended up

trapped on top of a church tower. Gosh – to think of that really happening! What d'you think, Edie – shall we make having wings our first wish?'

'Excuse me,' the Psammead said frostily, 'I will NOT be granting any more wishes.'

This was very disappointing – to get the famous Psammead without the wishes.

'But that's not fair,' the Lamb said. 'It's not my fault I was a baby the last time you came – and it's not Edie's fault she wasn't born yet. I reckon you owe us at least a wish each.'

The Lamb was a great one for arguing; Father called him the Barrack-Room Lawyer.

'My dear Lamb, can't you see this is an EMERGENCY?' the Psammead groaned. 'I don't even have enough power to get myself home! For some infernal reason I've been de-magicked and dumped here.'

Far away, from the other end of the garden, Mother's voice called:

'Hilary! Edith!'

'That means it's nearly lunch and we have to go,' Edie said, gently stroking the top of the Psammead's head with one finger. 'It's a special lunch, a sort of

goodbye party for Cyril.'

'For Cyril? Where's he going?'

'He's Lieutenant Cyril now,' the Lamb said casually (trying to sound as if this wasn't the most thrilling thing in the world). 'He's going to the war.'

'War? What are you talking about?'

'Our country is at war with Germany. They've got this beastly little tick of an Emperor called Kaiser Wilhelm and they've invaded France and Belgium.'

Edie said, 'Some men from the government took all the horses from the farm next door because they're needed to pull the big guns.'

'Hilary! Edith!'

'I seem to have turned over two pages at once,' the Psammead said. 'Who is 'Hilary?"

'Me.' The Lamb pulled a face. 'I'm afraid it's my real name. Please ignore it; Mother's the only person who uses it.' He stood up, brushing his knees. 'You'd better get back into the sand; we'll dig you out again later.'

'Don't you dare leave me!' The little creature was horrified. 'I REFUSE to have anything to do with this freezing damp sand! If I have to stay in this dreadful place, I'll make do with the sand-bath under Anthea's

bed. Take me there AT ONCE!'

The Lamb and Edie looked at each other helplessly.

'Awfully sorry,' the Lamb said. 'Anthea doesn't keep a bath full of sand under her bed these days.'

'I've told you, I can't stay here. I need someone who knows about looking after sand-fairies.'

'We'll have to tell the Bigguns sometime,' Edie said (this was the family name for the four oldest children). 'Won't they be happy to see the Psammead again?'

'Hmm, I don't know about that,' the Lamb said. 'He hasn't exactly popped out at the most convenient time.'

'I could run and fetch them now – '

'They won't believe you.'The Lamb was old enough to know that their big brothers and sisters were far too busy and impatient to listen to stuff about the old stories – especially today, when everything was at sixes and sevens.

'Hilary! Edith!'

'Nothing else for it – we'll have to take him up to the house. They'll have to listen when they actually see him. Can you carry him in your skirt?'

'No, he's too heavy – and his legs are too long.'

The Lamb shrugged off his tweed jacket. 'I'll wrap

him in this and carry him in my arms.' He spread it out on the sand beside Edie.

'I don't seem to have much choice.' The Psammead hopped from Edie's lap onto the jacket, and yelped angrily. 'Ouch! I'm sitting on something knobbly!'

'Sorry,' the Lamb said. 'The pockets are full of conkers.'

The Psammead pulled his eyes back into his head, until his face was nothing but a crease of crossness. 'Hurry up – I'm freezing!'

The Lamb carefully wrapped the creature in his jacket, so that not one hair of it was visible. He picked it up and cradled the strange tweed bundle in his arms.

Edie giggled. 'Now it looks like you're holding a baby!'

'Hilary! Edith! Where are you?'

'Come on.' Holding his bundle as tightly as he dared, the Lamb managed to scramble out of the gravel pit, and Edie helped him through the hedge into the garden.

The garden of the White House was a long lawn, surrounded by a deep shrubbery, and the two children were able to get to the kitchen door though

the dripping branches without being seen from the windows. They halted in the shelter of the nearest rhododendron, a few yards from the back of the house. Mother was on the terrace, outside the sitting room, flustered from calling them.

'She mustn't see me,' the Lamb whispered. 'You'll have to create a diversion.'

'But will she be able to see the Psammead?' Edie whispered back. 'Wasn't he always invisible to grown-ups?'

'I can smell damp evergreens,' said the muffled voice of the Psammead, from the tweedy depths of his bundle. 'Now I KNOW I'm back in wretched England.'

Mother said, 'Anthea darling, do go and find the little ones – '

Inside the sitting room they heard Anthea saying something.

'I've no idea,' Mother said. 'I told them not to go anywhere – Mrs Field will be so cross if we're late sitting down – ' She went into the house through the French window and shut it behind her.

'Good-oh,' said the Lamb. He gave the Psammead a gentle squeeze. 'Anthea's the exact person we need.

She'll know what to do.'

A moment later the kitchen door opened and Anthea came out into the garden. Because this was a special occasion she had left off what Mother called her 'arty smocks', and was looking very grown up in her smart green dress, with her curly brown hair pinned up in a bun.

When she saw the Lamb and Edie scuttling out of the shrubbery, she frowned at them. 'There you are – where on earth have you been?'

'We were in the gravel pit,' Edie said. 'And you'll never guess who we found – the Psammead!'

'Go and wash your hands,' Anthea said. 'I can't imagine how you managed to get so filthy. Granny's here and Mrs F is muttering darkly about gravy.'

'Wait – didn't you hear me? We met the Psammead!'

'Oh, Edie – there's no time for those old stories now.'

'This isn't a story!' Edie scowled; a couple of years ago she would have stamped her foot. 'Why won't you listen?'

'We brought him with us,' the Lamb said. 'He's wrapped in my jacket.'

For the first time, their oldest sister looked at

them properly. 'What on earth have you got there? Honestly, Lamb – of all the days to sneak in one of your smelly animals.'

The muffled voice of the Psammead said, 'For the last time, I am NOT an animal. And I'm most certainly NOT 'smelly'.'

The effect on Anthea was dramatic and rather alarming; her lips went white and she looked as if she had seen a ghost.

'What - ?' she asked faintly.

'Panther, darling – ' Edie grabbed her hand. 'Please listen to us – ' 'Panther' was Anthea's old childhood nickname. Cyril's was 'Squirrel', Robert's was 'Bobs' and Jane had been 'Puss', though she had refused to answer to it for years. 'It really is IT and he can't get home to his temple and he can't stay in the gravel pit and we don't know what to do with him – '

The Lamb gently unfolded his jacket, to uncover the Psammead's little head, with its soft, floppy ears all squashed out of shape; his eyes shot out on their stalks.

Anthea stared; the colour surged into her pale face, and she beamed with astonished joy. 'It's really you - oh, how lovely!' Her eyes filled with tears and she

laughed softly. ‘But I mustn’t cry, or you won’t let me touch you.’

‘Certainly not,’ the Psammead said. ‘Tears are more painful to me than any other form of dampness – but you can’t be Anthea – you’re far too old.’

‘You dear, furry thing, how wonderful to see you again.’ She scrubbed at her eyes with her sleeve. ‘See? I’m as dry as a bone now – I’m going to give you a kiss.’

Edie and the Lamb shot grins of relief at each other – this was the old Panther of the games and stories, and not the serious grown-up Anthea who drew naked people and argued with Father about art.

‘Ugh – don’t you dare! Kisses are wet, sloppy things – oh, well – perhaps occasionally – ’

Anthea leaned forward and gently kissed the top of the Psammead’s head, and though he was still trying to look cross, a smile flickered across his furry mouth.

‘Now I know I haven’t slipped into a dream,’ Anthea said. ‘But dear old Psammead, why have you come back?’ She frowned slightly. ‘And what on earth are we going to do with you?’