

ЭДИТ НЕСБИТ

THE STORY OF
THE AMULET

Эдит Несбит

The Story of the Amulet

«Public Domain»

Несбит Э.

The Story of the Amulet / Э. Несбит — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER 1. THE PSAMMEAD	5
CHAPTER 2. THE HALF AMULET	12
CHAPTER 3. THE PAST	18
CHAPTER 4. EIGHT THOUSAND YEARS AGO	23
CHAPTER 5. THE FIGHT IN THE VILLAGE	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

E. Nesbit

The Story of the Amulet

CHAPTER 1. THE PSAMMEAD

There were once four children who spent their summer holidays in a white house, happily situated between a sandpit and a chalkpit. One day they had the good fortune to find in the sandpit a strange creature. Its eyes were on long horns like 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—and it had hands and feet like a monkey's. It told the children—whose names were Cyril, Robert, Anthea, and Jane—that it was a Psammead or sand-fairy. (Psammead is pronounced Sammy-ad.) It was old, old, old, and its birthday was almost at the very beginning of everything. And it had been buried in the sand for thousands of years. But it still kept its fairylikeness, and part of this fairylikeness was its power to give people whatever they wished for. You know fairies have always been able to do this. Cyril, Robert, Anthea, and Jane now found their wishes come true; but, somehow, they never could think of just the right things to wish for, and their wishes sometimes turned out very oddly indeed. In the end their unwise wishings landed them in what Robert called 'a very tight place indeed', and the Psammead consented to help them out of it in return for their promise never never to ask it to grant them any more wishes, and never to tell anyone about it, because it did not want to be bothered to give wishes to anyone ever any more. At the moment of parting Jane said politely—

'I wish we were going to see you again some day.'

And the Psammead, touched by this friendly thought, granted the wish. The book about all this is called *Five Children and It*, and it ends up in a most tiresome way by saying—

'The children DID see the Psammead again, but it was not in the sandpit; it was—but I must say no more—'

The reason that nothing more could be said was that I had not then been able to find out exactly when and where the children met the Psammead again. Of course I knew they would meet it, because it was a beast of its word, and when it said a thing would happen, that thing happened without fail. How different from the people who tell us about what weather it is going to be on Thursday next, in London, the South Coast, and Channel!

The summer holidays during which the Psammead had been found and the wishes given had been wonderful holidays in the country, and the children had the highest hopes of just such another holiday for the next summer. The winter holidays were beguiled by the wonderful happenings of *The Phoenix* and *The Carpet*, and the loss of these two treasures would have left the children in despair, but for the splendid hope of their next holiday in the country. The world, they felt, and indeed had some reason to feel, was full of wonderful things—and they were really the sort of people that wonderful things happen to. So they looked forward to the summer holiday; but when it came everything was different, and very, very horrid. Father had to go out to Manchuria to telegraph news about the war to the tiresome paper he wrote for—the *Daily Bellow*, or something like that, was its name. And Mother, poor dear Mother, was away in Madeira, because she had been very ill. And The Lamb—I mean the baby—was with her. And Aunt Emma, who was Mother's sister, had suddenly married Uncle Reginald, who was Father's brother, and they had gone to China, which is much too far off for you to expect to be asked to spend the holidays in, however fond your aunt and uncle may be of you. So the children were left in the care of old Nurse, who lived in Fitzroy Street, near the British Museum, and though she was always very kind to them, and indeed spoiled them far more than would be good for the most grown-up of us, the four children felt perfectly wretched, and when the cab had driven off with Father and all his boxes and guns and the sheepskin, with blankets and the aluminium

mess-kit inside it, the stoutest heart quailed, and the girls broke down altogether, and sobbed in each other's arms, while the boys each looked out of one of the long gloomy windows of the parlour, and tried to pretend that no boy would be such a muff as to cry.

I hope you notice that they were not cowardly enough to cry till their Father had gone; they knew he had quite enough to upset him without that. But when he was gone everyone felt as if it had been trying not to cry all its life, and that it must cry now, if it died for it. So they cried.

Tea—with shrimps and watercress—cheered them a little. The watercress was arranged in a hedge round a fat glass salt-cellar, a tasteful device they had never seen before. But it was not a cheerful meal.

After tea Anthea went up to the room that had been Father's, and when she saw how dreadfully he wasn't there, and remembered how every minute was taking him further and further from her, and nearer and nearer to the guns of the Russians, she cried a little more. Then she thought of Mother, ill and alone, and perhaps at that very moment wanting a little girl to put eau-de-cologne on her head, and make her sudden cups of tea, and she cried more than ever. And then she remembered what Mother had said, the night before she went away, about Anthea being the eldest girl, and about trying to make the others happy, and things like that. So she stopped crying, and thought instead. And when she had thought as long as she could bear she washed her face and combed her hair, and went down to the others, trying her best to look as though crying were an exercise she had never even heard of.

She found the parlour in deepest gloom, hardly relieved at all by the efforts of Robert, who, to make the time pass, was pulling Jane's hair—not hard, but just enough to tease.

'Look here,' said Anthea. 'Let's have a palaver.' This word dated from the awful day when Cyril had carelessly wished that there were Red Indians in England—and there had been. The word brought back memories of last summer holidays and everyone groaned; they thought of the white house with the beautiful tangled garden—late roses, asters, marigold, sweet mignonette, and feathery asparagus—of the wilderness which someone had once meant to make into an orchard, but which was now, as Father said, 'five acres of thistles haunted by the ghosts of baby cherry-trees'. They thought of the view across the valley, where the lime-kilns looked like Aladdin's palaces in the sunshine, and they thought of their own sandpit, with its fringe of yellowy grasses and pale-stringy-stalked wild flowers, and the little holes in the cliff that were the little sand-martins' little front doors. And they thought of the free fresh air smelling of thyme and sweetbriar, and the scent of the wood-smoke from the cottages in the lane—and they looked round old Nurse's stuffy parlour, and Jane said—

'Oh, how different it all is!'

It was. Old Nurse had been in the habit of letting lodgings, till Father gave her the children to take care of. And her rooms were furnished 'for letting'. Now it is a very odd thing that no one ever seems to furnish a room 'for letting' in a bit the same way as one would furnish it for living in. This room had heavy dark red stuff curtains—the colour that blood would not make a stain on—with coarse lace curtains inside. The carpet was yellow, and violet, with bits of grey and brown oilcloth in odd places. The fireplace had shavings and tinsel in it. There was a very varnished mahogany chiffonier, or sideboard, with a lock that wouldn't act. There were hard chairs—far too many of them—with crochet antimacassars slipping off their seats, all of which sloped the wrong way. The table wore a cloth of a cruel green colour with a yellow chain-stitch pattern round it. Over the fireplace was a looking-glass that made you look much uglier than you really were, however plain you might be to begin with. Then there was a mantelboard with maroon plush and wool fringe that did not match the plush; a dreary clock like a black marble tomb—it was silent as the grave too, for it had long since forgotten how to tick. And there were painted glass vases that never had any flowers in, and a painted tambourine that no one ever played, and painted brackets with nothing on them.

'And maple-framed engravings of the Queen, the Houses of Parliament, the Plains of Heaven, and of a blunt-nosed woodman's flat return.'

There were two books—last December's Bradshaw, and an odd volume of Plumridge's Commentary on Thessalonians. There were—but I cannot dwell longer on this painful picture. It was indeed, as Jane said, very different.

'Let's have a palaver,' said Anthea again.

'What about?' said Cyril, yawning.

'There's nothing to have ANYTHING about,' said Robert kicking the leg of the table miserably.

'I don't want to play,' said Jane, and her tone was grumpy.

Anthea tried very hard not to be cross. She succeeded.

'Look here,' she said, 'don't think I want to be preachy or a beast in any way, but I want to what Father calls define the situation. Do you agree?'

'Fire ahead,' said Cyril without enthusiasm.

'Well then. We all know the reason we're staying here is because Nurse couldn't leave her house on account of the poor learned gentleman on the top-floor. And there was no one else Father could entrust to take care of us—and you know it's taken a lot of money, Mother's going to Madeira to be made well.'

Jane sniffed miserably.

'Yes, I know,' said Anthea in a hurry, 'but don't let's think about how horrid it all is. I mean we can't go to things that cost a lot, but we must do SOMETHING. And I know there are heaps of things you can see in London without paying for them, and I thought we'd go and see them. We are all quite old now, and we haven't got The Lamb—'

Jane sniffed harder than before.

'I mean no one can say "No" because of him, dear pet. And I thought we MUST get Nurse to see how quite old we are, and let us go out by ourselves, or else we shall never have any sort of a time at all. And I vote we see everything there is, and let's begin by asking Nurse to give us some bits of bread and we'll go to St James's Park. There are ducks there, I know, we can feed them. Only we must make Nurse let us go by ourselves.'

'Hurrah for liberty!' said Robert, 'but she won't.'

'Yes she will,' said Jane unexpectedly. 'I thought about that this morning, and I asked Father, and he said yes; and what's more he told old Nurse we might, only he said we must always say where we wanted to go, and if it was right she would let us.'

'Three cheers for thoughtful Jane,' cried Cyril, now roused at last from his yawning despair. 'I say, let's go now.'

So they went, old Nurse only begging them to be careful of crossings, and to ask a policeman to assist in the more difficult cases. But they were used to crossings, for they had lived in Camden Town and knew the Kentish Town Road where the trams rush up and down like mad at all hours of the day and night, and seem as though, if anything, they would rather run over you than not.

They had promised to be home by dark, but it was July, so dark would be very late indeed, and long past bedtime.

They started to walk to St James's Park, and all their pockets were stuffed with bits of bread and the crusts of toast, to feed the ducks with. They started, I repeat, but they never got there.

Between Fitzroy Street and St James's Park there are a great many streets, and, if you go the right way you will pass a great many shops that you cannot possibly help stopping to look at. The children stopped to look at several with gold-lace and beads and pictures and jewellery and dresses, and hats, and oysters and lobsters in their windows, and their sorrow did not seem nearly so impossible to bear as it had done in the best parlour at No. 300, Fitzroy Street.

Presently, by some wonderful chance turn of Robert's (who had been voted Captain because the girls thought it would be good for him—and indeed he thought so himself—and of course Cyril couldn't vote against him because it would have looked like a mean jealousy), they came into the little interesting criss-crossy streets that held the most interesting shops of all—the shops where live

things were sold. There was one shop window entirely filled with cages, and all sorts of beautiful birds in them. The children were delighted till they remembered how they had once wished for wings themselves, and had had them—and then they felt how desperately unhappy anything with wings must be if it is shut up in a cage and not allowed to fly.

‘It must be fairly beastly to be a bird in a cage,’ said Cyril. ‘Come on!’

They went on, and Cyril tried to think out a scheme for making his fortune as a gold-digger at Klondyke, and then buying all the caged birds in the world and setting them free. Then they came to a shop that sold cats, but the cats were in cages, and the children could not help wishing someone would buy all the cats and put them on hearthrugs, which are the proper places for cats. And there was the dog-shop, and that was not a happy thing to look at either, because all the dogs were chained or caged, and all the dogs, big and little, looked at the four children with sad wistful eyes and wagged beseeching tails as if they were trying to say, ‘Buy me! buy me! buy me! and let me go for a walk with you; oh, do buy me, and buy my poor brothers too! Do! do! do!’ They almost said, ‘Do! do! do!’ plain to the ear, as they whined; all but one big Irish terrier, and he growled when Jane patted him.

‘Grrrrr,’ he seemed to say, as he looked at them from the back corner of his eye—‘YOU won’t buy me. Nobody will—ever—I shall die chained up—and I don’t know that I care how soon it is, either!’

I don’t know that the children would have understood all this, only once they had been in a besieged castle, so they knew how hateful it is to be kept in when you want to get out.

Of course they could not buy any of the dogs. They did, indeed, ask the price of the very, very smallest, and it was sixty-five pounds—but that was because it was a Japanese toy spaniel like the Queen once had her portrait painted with, when she was only Princess of Wales. But the children thought, if the smallest was all that money, the biggest would run into thousands—so they went on.

And they did not stop at any more cat or dog or bird shops, but passed them by, and at last they came to a shop that seemed as though it only sold creatures that did not much mind where they were—such as goldfish and white mice, and sea-anemones and other aquarium beasts, and lizards and toads, and hedgehogs and tortoises, and tame rabbits and guinea-pigs. And there they stopped for a long time, and fed the guinea-pigs with bits of bread through the cage-bars, and wondered whether it would be possible to keep a sandy-coloured double-lop in the basement of the house in Fitzroy Street.

‘I don’t suppose old Nurse would mind VERY much,’ said Jane. ‘Rabbits are most awfully tame sometimes. I expect it would know her voice and follow her all about.’

‘She’d tumble over it twenty times a day,’ said Cyril; ‘now a snake—’

‘There aren’t any snakes,’ said Robert hastily, ‘and besides, I never could cotton to snakes somehow—I wonder why.’

‘Worms are as bad,’ said Anthea, ‘and eels and slugs—I think it’s because we don’t like things that haven’t got legs.’

‘Father says snakes have got legs hidden away inside of them,’ said Robert.

‘Yes—and he says WE’VE got tails hidden away inside us—but it doesn’t either of it come to anything REALLY,’ said Anthea. ‘I hate things that haven’t any legs.’

‘It’s worse when they have too many,’ said Jane with a shudder, ‘think of centipedes!’

They stood there on the pavement, a cause of some inconvenience to the passersby, and thus beguiled the time with conversation. Cyril was leaning his elbow on the top of a hutch that had seemed empty when they had inspected the whole edifice of hutches one by one, and he was trying to reawaken the interest of a hedgehog that had curled itself into a ball earlier in the interview, when a small, soft voice just below his elbow said, quietly, plainly and quite unmistakably—not in any squeak or whine that had to be translated—but in downright common English—

‘Buy me—do—please buy me!’

Cyril started as though he had been pinched, and jumped a yard away from the hutch.

‘Come back—oh, come back!’ said the voice, rather louder but still softly; ‘stoop down and pretend to be tying up your bootlace—I see it’s undone, as usual.’

Cyril mechanically obeyed. He knelt on one knee on the dry, hot dusty pavement, peered into the darkness of the hutch and found himself face to face with—the Psammead!

It seemed much thinner than when he had last seen it. It was dusty and dirty, and its fur was untidy and ragged. It had hunched itself up into a miserable lump, and its long snail’s eyes were drawn in quite tight so that they hardly showed at all.

‘Listen,’ said the Psammead, in a voice that sounded as though it would begin to cry in a minute, ‘I don’t think the creature who keeps this shop will ask a very high price for me. I’ve bitten him more than once, and I’ve made myself look as common as I can. He’s never had a glance from my beautiful, beautiful eyes. Tell the others I’m here—but tell them to look at some of those low, common beasts while I’m talking to you. The creature inside mustn’t think you care much about me, or he’ll put a price upon me far, far beyond your means. I remember in the dear old days last summer you never had much money. Oh—I never thought I should be so glad to see you—I never did.’ It sniffed, and shot out its long snail’s eyes expressly to drop a tear well away from its fur. ‘Tell the others I’m here, and then I’ll tell you exactly what to do about buying me.’ Cyril tied his bootlace into a hard knot, stood up and addressed the others in firm tones—

‘Look here,’ he said, ‘I’m not kidding—and I appeal to your honour,’ an appeal which in this family was never made in vain. ‘Don’t look at that hutch—look at the white rat. Now you are not to look at that hutch whatever I say.’

He stood in front of it to prevent mistakes.

‘Now get yourselves ready for a great surprise. In that hutch there’s an old friend of ours—DON’T look!—Yes; it’s the Psammead, the good old Psammead! it wants us to buy it. It says you’re not to look at it. Look at the white rat and count your money! On your honour don’t look!’

The others responded nobly. They looked at the white rat till they quite stared him out of countenance, so that he went and sat up on his hind legs in a far corner and hid his eyes with his front paws, and pretended he was washing his face.

Cyril stooped again, busying himself with the other bootlace and listened for the Psammead’s further instructions.

‘Go in,’ said the Psammead, ‘and ask the price of lots of other things. Then say, “What do you want for that monkey that’s lost its tail—the mangy old thing in the third hutch from the end.” Oh—don’t mind MY feelings—call me a mangy monkey—I’ve tried hard enough to look like one! I don’t think he’ll put a high price on me—I’ve bitten him eleven times since I came here the day before yesterday. If he names a bigger price than you can afford, say you wish you had the money.’

‘But you can’t give us wishes. I’ve promised never to have another wish from you,’ said the bewildered Cyril.

‘Don’t be a silly little idiot,’ said the Sand-fairy in trembling but affectionate tones, ‘but find out how much money you’ve got between you, and do exactly what I tell you.’

Cyril, pointing a stiff and unmeaning finger at the white rat, so as to pretend that its charms alone employed his tongue, explained matters to the others, while the Psammead hunched itself, and bunched itself, and did its very best to make itself look uninteresting. Then the four children filed into the shop.

‘How much do you want for that white rat?’ asked Cyril.

‘Eightpence,’ was the answer.

‘And the guinea-pigs?’

‘Eighteenpence to five bob, according to the breed.’

‘And the lizards?’

‘Ninepence each.’

‘And toads?’

‘Fourpence. Now look here,’ said the greasy owner of all this caged life with a sudden ferocity which made the whole party back hurriedly on to the wainscoting of hutches with which the shop was lined. ‘Lookee here. I ain’t agoin’ to have you a comin’ in here a turnin’ the whole place outer winder, an’ prizing every animile in the stock just for your larks, so don’t think it! If you’re a buyer, BE a buyer—but I never had a customer yet as wanted to buy mice, and lizards, and toads, and guineas all at once. So hout you goes.’

‘Oh! wait a minute,’ said the wretched Cyril, feeling how foolishly yet well-meaningly he had carried out the Psammead’s instructions. ‘Just tell me one thing. What do you want for the mangy old monkey in the third hutch from the end?’

The shopman only saw in this a new insult.

‘Mangy young monkey yourself,’ said he; ‘get along with your blooming cheek. Hout you goes!’

‘Oh! don’t be so cross,’ said Jane, losing her head altogether, ‘don’t you see he really DOES want to know THAT!’

‘Ho! does ‘e indeed,’ sneered the merchant. Then he scratched his ear suspiciously, for he was a sharp business man, and he knew the ring of truth when he heard it. His hand was bandaged, and three minutes before he would have been glad to sell the ‘mangy old monkey’ for ten shillings. Now—‘Ho! ‘e does, does ‘e,’ he said, ‘then two pun ten’s my price. He’s not got his fellow that monkey ain’t, nor yet his match, not this side of the equator, which he comes from. And the only one ever seen in London. Ought to be in the Zoo. Two pun ten, down on the nail, or hout you goes!’

The children looked at each other—twenty-three shillings and fivepence was all they had in the world, and it would have been merely three and fivepence, but for the sovereign which Father had given to them ‘between them’ at parting. ‘We’ve only twenty-three shillings and fivepence,’ said Cyril, rattling the money in his pocket.

‘Twenty-three farthings and somebody’s own cheek,’ said the dealer, for he did not believe that Cyril had so much money.

There was a miserable pause. Then Anthea remembered, and said—

‘Oh! I WISH I had two pounds ten.’

‘So do I, Miss, I’m sure,’ said the man with bitter politeness; ‘I wish you ‘ad, I’m sure!’

Anthea’s hand was on the counter, something seemed to slide under it. She lifted it. There lay five bright half sovereigns.

‘Why, I HAVE got it after all,’ she said; ‘here’s the money, now let’s have the Sammy, ... the monkey I mean.’

The dealer looked hard at the money, but he made haste to put it in his pocket.

‘I only hope you come by it honest,’ he said, shrugging his shoulders. He scratched his ear again.

‘Well!’ he said, ‘I suppose I must let you have it, but it’s worth thribble the money, so it is—’

He slowly led the way out to the hutch—opened the door gingerly, and made a sudden fierce grab at the Psammead, which the Psammead acknowledged in one last long lingering bite.

‘Here, take the brute,’ said the shopman, squeezing the Psammead so tight that he nearly choked it. ‘It’s bit me to the marrow, it have.’

The man’s eyes opened as Anthea held out her arms.

‘Don’t blame me if it tears your face off its bones,’ he said, and the Psammead made a leap from his dirty horny hands, and Anthea caught it in hers, which were not very clean, certainly, but at any rate were soft and pink, and held it kindly and closely.

‘But you can’t take it home like that,’ Cyril said, ‘we shall have a crowd after us,’ and indeed two errand boys and a policeman had already collected.

‘I can’t give you nothink only a paper-bag, like what we put the tortoises in,’ said the man grudgingly.

So the whole party went into the shop, and the shopman’s eyes nearly came out of his head when, having given Anthea the largest paper-bag he could find, he saw her hold it open, and the

Psammead carefully creep into it. 'Well!' he said, 'if that there don't beat cockfighting! But p'raps you've met the brute afore.'

'Yes,' said Cyril affably, 'he's an old friend of ours.'

'If I'd a known that,' the man rejoined, 'you shouldn't a had him under twice the money. 'Owever,' he added, as the children disappeared, 'I ain't done so bad, seeing as I only give five bob for the beast. But then there's the bites to take into account!'

The children trembling in agitation and excitement, carried home the Psammead, trembling in its paper-bag.

When they got it home, Anthea nursed it, and stroked it, and would have cried over it, if she hadn't remembered how it hated to be wet.

When it recovered enough to speak, it said—

'Get me sand; silver sand from the oil and colour shop. And get me plenty.'

They got the sand, and they put it and the Psammead in the round bath together, and it rubbed itself, and rolled itself, and shook itself and scraped itself, and scratched itself, and preened itself, till it felt clean and comfy, and then it scabbled a hasty hole in the sand, and went to sleep in it.

The children hid the bath under the girls' bed, and had supper. Old Nurse had got them a lovely supper of bread and butter and fried onions. She was full of kind and delicate thoughts.

When Anthea woke the next morning, the Psammead was snuggling down between her shoulder and Jane's.

'You have saved my life,' it said. 'I know that man would have thrown cold water on me sooner or later, and then I should have died. I saw him wash out a guinea-pig's hutch yesterday morning. I'm still frightfully sleepy, I think I'll go back to sand for another nap. Wake the boys and this dormouse of a Jane, and when you've had your breakfasts we'll have a talk.'

'Don't YOU want any breakfast?' asked Anthea.

'I daresay I shall pick a bit presently,' it said; 'but sand is all I care about—it's meat and drink to me, and coals and fire and wife and children.' With these words it clambered down by the bedclothes and scrambled back into the bath, where they heard it scratching itself out of sight.

'Well!' said Anthea, 'anyhow our holidays won't be dull NOW. We've found the Psammead again.'

'No,' said Jane, beginning to put on her stockings. 'We shan't be dull—but it'll be only like having a pet dog now it can't give us wishes.'

'Oh, don't be so discontented,' said Anthea. 'If it can't do anything else it can tell us about Megatheriums and things.'

CHAPTER 2. THE HALF AMULET

Long ago—that is to say last summer—the children, finding themselves embarrassed by some wish which the Psammead had granted them, and which the servants had not received in a proper spirit, had wished that the servants might not notice the gifts which the Psammead gave. And when they parted from the Psammead their last wish had been that they should meet it again. Therefore they HAD met it (and it was jolly lucky for the Psammead, as Robert pointed out). Now, of course, you see that the Psammead's being where it was, was the consequence of one of their wishes, and therefore was a Psammead-wish, and as such could not be noticed by the servants. And it was soon plain that in the Psammead's opinion old Nurse was still a servant, although she had now a house of her own, for she never noticed the Psammead at all. And that was as well, for she would never have consented to allow the girls to keep an animal and a bath of sand under their bed.

When breakfast had been cleared away—it was a very nice breakfast with hot rolls to it, a luxury quite out of the common way—Anthea went and dragged out the bath, and woke the Psammead.

It stretched and shook itself.

'You must have bolted your breakfast most unwholesomely,' it said, 'you can't have been five minutes over it.'

'We've been nearly an hour,' said Anthea. 'Come—you know you promised.'

'Now look here,' said the Psammead, sitting back on the sand and shooting out its long eyes suddenly, 'we'd better begin as we mean to go on. It won't do to have any misunderstanding, so I tell you plainly that—'

'Oh, PLEASE,' Anthea pleaded, 'do wait till we get to the others. They'll think it most awfully sneakish of me to talk to you without them; do come down, there's a dear.'

She knelt before the sand-bath and held out her arms. The Psammead must have remembered how glad it had been to jump into those same little arms only the day before, for it gave a little grudging grunt, and jumped once more.

Anthea wrapped it in her pinafore and carried it downstairs. It was welcomed in a thrilling silence. At last Anthea said, 'Now then!'

'What place is this?' asked the Psammead, shooting its eyes out and turning them slowly round.

'It's a sitting-room, of course,' said Robert.

'Then I don't like it,' said the Psammead.

'Never mind,' said Anthea kindly; 'we'll take you anywhere you like if you want us to. What was it you were going to say upstairs when I said the others wouldn't like it if I stayed talking to you without them?'

It looked keenly at her, and she blushed.

'Don't be silly,' it said sharply. 'Of course, it's quite natural that you should like your brothers and sisters to know exactly how good and unselfish you were.'

'I wish you wouldn't,' said Jane. 'Anthea was quite right. What was it you were going to say when she stopped you?'

'I'll tell you,' said the Psammead, 'since you're so anxious to know. I was going to say this. You've saved my life—and I'm not ungrateful—but it doesn't change your nature or mine. You're still very ignorant, and rather silly, and I am worth a thousand of you any day of the week.'

'Of course you are!' Anthea was beginning but it interrupted her.

'It's very rude to interrupt,' it said; 'what I mean is that I'm not going to stand any nonsense, and if you think what you've done is to give you the right to pet me or make me demean myself by playing with you, you'll find out that what you think doesn't matter a single penny. See? It's what I think that matters.'

'I know,' said Cyril, 'it always was, if you remember.'

‘Well,’ said the Psammead, ‘then that’s settled. We’re to be treated as we deserve. I with respect, and all of you with—but I don’t wish to be offensive. Do you want me to tell you how I got into that horrible den you bought me out of? Oh, I’m not ungrateful! I haven’t forgotten it and I shan’t forget it.’

‘Do tell us,’ said Anthea. ‘I know you’re awfully clever, but even with all your cleverness, I don’t believe you can possibly know how—how respectfully we do respect you. Don’t we?’

The others all said yes—and fidgeted in their chairs. Robert spoke the wishes of all when he said—

‘I do wish you’d go on.’ So it sat up on the green-covered table and went on.

‘When you’d gone away,’ it said, ‘I went to sand for a bit, and slept. I was tired out with all your silly wishes, and I felt as though I hadn’t really been to sand for a year.’

‘To sand?’ Jane repeated.

‘Where I sleep. You go to bed. I go to sand.’

Jane yawned; the mention of bed made her feel sleepy.

‘All right,’ said the Psammead, in offended tones. ‘I’m sure *I* don’t want to tell you a long tale. A man caught me, and I bit him. And he put me in a bag with a dead hare and a dead rabbit. And he took me to his house and put me out of the bag into a basket with holes that I could see through. And I bit him again. And then he brought me to this city, which I am told is called the Modern Babylon—though it’s not a bit like the old Babylon—and he sold me to the man you bought me from, and then I bit them both. Now, what’s your news?’

‘There’s not quite so much biting in our story,’ said Cyril regretfully; ‘in fact, there isn’t any. Father’s gone to Manchuria, and Mother and The Lamb have gone to Madeira because Mother was ill, and don’t I just wish that they were both safe home again.’

Merely from habit, the Sand-fairy began to blow itself out, but it stopped short suddenly.

‘I forgot,’ it said; ‘I can’t give you any more wishes.’

‘No—but look here,’ said Cyril, ‘couldn’t we call in old Nurse and get her to say SHE wishes they were safe home. I’m sure she does.’

‘No go,’ said the Psammead. ‘It’s just the same as your wishing yourself if you get some one else to wish for you. It won’t act.’

‘But it did yesterday—with the man in the shop,’ said Robert.

‘Ah yes,’ said the creature, ‘but you didn’t ASK him to wish, and you didn’t know what would happen if he did. That can’t be done again. It’s played out.’

‘Then you can’t help us at all,’ said Jane; ‘oh—I did think you could do something; I’ve been thinking about it ever since we saved your life yesterday. I thought you’d be certain to be able to fetch back Father, even if you couldn’t manage Mother.’

And Jane began to cry.

‘Now DON’T,’ said the Psammead hastily; ‘you know how it always upsets me if you cry. I can’t feel safe a moment. Look here; you must have some new kind of charm.’

‘That’s easier said than done.’

‘Not a bit of it,’ said the creature; ‘there’s one of the strongest charms in the world not a stone’s throw from where you bought me yesterday. The man that I bit so—the first one, I mean—went into a shop to ask how much something cost—I think he said it was a concertina—and while he was telling the man in the shop how much too much he wanted for it, I saw the charm in a sort of tray, with a lot of other things. If you can only buy THAT, you will be able to have your heart’s desire.’

The children looked at each other and then at the Psammead. Then Cyril coughed awkwardly and took sudden courage to say what everyone was thinking.

‘I do hope you won’t be waxy,’ he said; ‘but it’s like this: when you used to give us our wishes they almost always got us into some row or other, and we used to think you wouldn’t have been pleased if they hadn’t. Now, about this charm—we haven’t got over and above too much tin, and if we blue it all on this charm and it turns out to be not up to much—well—you see what I’m driving at, don’t you?’

‘I see that YOU don’t see more than the length of your nose, and THAT’S not far,’ said the Psammead crossly. ‘Look here, I HAD to give you the wishes, and of course they turned out badly, in a sort of way, because you hadn’t the sense to wish for what was good for you. But this charm’s quite different. I haven’t GOT to do this for you, it’s just my own generous kindness that makes me tell you about it. So it’s bound to be all right. See?’

‘Don’t be cross,’ said Anthea, ‘Please, PLEASE don’t. You see, it’s all we’ve got; we shan’t have any more pocket-money till Daddy comes home—unless he sends us some in a letter. But we DO trust you. And I say all of you,’ she went on, ‘don’t you think it’s worth spending ALL the money, if there’s even the chanciest chance of getting Father and Mother back safe NOW? Just think of it! Oh, do let’s!’

‘I don’t care what you do,’ said the Psammead; ‘I’ll go back to sand again till you’ve made up your minds.’

‘No, don’t!’ said everybody; and Jane added, ‘We are quite mind made-up—don’t you see we are? Let’s get our hats. Will you come with us?’

‘Of course,’ said the Psammead; ‘how else would you find the shop?’

So everybody got its hat. The Psammead was put into a flat bass-bag that had come from Farringdon Market with two pounds of filleted plaice in it. Now it contained about three pounds and a quarter of solid Psammead, and the children took it in turns to carry it.

‘It’s not half the weight of The Lamb,’ Robert said, and the girls sighed.

The Psammead poked a wary eye out of the top of the basket every now and then, and told the children which turnings to take.

‘How on earth do you know?’ asked Robert. ‘I can’t think how you do it.’

And the Psammead said sharply, ‘No—I don’t suppose you can.’

At last they came to THE shop. It had all sorts and kinds of things in the window—concertinas, and silk handkerchiefs, china vases and tea-cups, blue Japanese jars, pipes, swords, pistols, lace collars, silver spoons tied up in half-dozens, and wedding-rings in a red lacquered basin. There were officers’ epaulets and doctors’ lancets. There were tea-caddies inlaid with red turtle-shell and brass curly-wurlies, plates of different kinds of money, and stacks of different kinds of plates. There was a beautiful picture of a little girl washing a dog, which Jane liked very much. And in the middle of the window there was a dirty silver tray full of mother-of-pearl card counters, old seals, paste buckles, snuff-boxes, and all sorts of little dingy odds and ends.

The Psammead put its head quite out of the fish-basket to look in the window, when Cyril said—

‘There’s a tray there with rubbish in it.’

And then its long snail’s eyes saw something that made them stretch out so much that they were as long and thin as new slate-pencils. Its fur bristled thickly, and its voice was quite hoarse with excitement as it whispered—

‘That’s it! That’s it! There, under that blue and yellow buckle, you can see a bit sticking out. It’s red. Do you see?’

‘Is it that thing something like a horse-shoe?’ asked Cyril. ‘And red, like the common sealing-wax you do up parcels with?’ ‘Yes, that’s it,’ said the Psammead. ‘Now, you do just as you did before. Ask the price of other things. That blue buckle would do. Then the man will get the tray out of the window. I think you’d better be the one,’ it said to Anthea. ‘We’ll wait out here.’

So the others flattened their noses against the shop window, and presently a large, dirty, short-fingered hand with a very big diamond ring came stretching through the green half-curtains at the back of the shop window and took away the tray.

They could not see what was happening in the interview between Anthea and the Diamond Ring, and it seemed to them that she had had time—if she had had money—to buy everything in

the shop before the moment came when she stood before them, her face wreathed in grins, as Cyril said later, and in her hand the charm.

It was something like this: [Drawing omitted.] and it was made of a red, smooth, softly shiny stone.

‘I’ve got it,’ Anthea whispered, just opening her hand to give the others a glimpse of it. ‘Do let’s get home. We can’t stand here like stuck-pigs looking at it in the street.’

So home they went. The parlour in Fitzroy Street was a very flat background to magic happenings. Down in the country among the flowers and green fields anything had seemed—and indeed had been—possible. But it was hard to believe that anything really wonderful could happen so near the Tottenham Court Road. But the Psammead was there—and it in itself was wonderful. And it could talk—and it had shown them where a charm could be bought that would make the owner of it perfectly happy. So the four children hurried home, taking very long steps, with their chins stuck out, and their mouths shut very tight indeed. They went so fast that the Psammead was quite shaken about in its fish-bag, but it did not say anything—perhaps for fear of attracting public notice.

They got home at last, very hot indeed, and set the Psammead on the green tablecloth.

‘Now then!’ said Cyril.

But the Psammead had to have a plate of sand fetched for it, for it was quite faint. When it had refreshed itself a little it said—

‘Now then! Let me see the charm,’ and Anthea laid it on the green table-cover. The Psammead shot out his long eyes to look at it, then it turned them reproachfully on Anthea and said—

‘But there’s only half of it here!’

This was indeed a blow.

‘It was all there was,’ said Anthea, with timid firmness. She knew it was not her fault. ‘There should be another piece,’ said the Psammead, ‘and a sort of pin to fasten the two together.’

‘Isn’t half any good?’—‘Won’t it work without the other bit?’—‘It cost seven-and-six.’—‘Oh, bother, bother, bother!’—‘Don’t be silly little idiots!’ said everyone and the Psammead altogether.

Then there was a wretched silence. Cyril broke it—

‘What shall we do?’

‘Go back to the shop and see if they haven’t got the other half,’ said the Psammead. ‘I’ll go to sand till you come back. Cheer up! Even the bit you’ve got is SOME good, but it’ll be no end of a bother if you can’t find the other.’

So Cyril went to the shop. And the Psammead to sand. And the other three went to dinner, which was now ready. And old Nurse was very cross that Cyril was not ready too.

The three were watching at the windows when Cyril returned, and even before he was near enough for them to see his face there was something about the slouch of his shoulders and set of his knickerbockers and the way he dragged his boots along that showed but too plainly that his errand had been in vain.

‘Well?’ they all said, hoping against hope on the front-door step.

‘No go,’ Cyril answered; ‘the man said the thing was perfect. He said it was a Roman lady’s locket, and people shouldn’t buy curios if they didn’t know anything about arky—something or other, and that he never went back on a bargain, because it wasn’t business, and he expected his customers to act the same. He was simply nasty—that’s what he was, and I want my dinner.’

It was plain that Cyril was not pleased.

The unlikeliness of anything really interesting happening in that parlour lay like a weight of lead on everyone’s spirits. Cyril had his dinner, and just as he was swallowing the last mouthful of apple-pudding there was a scratch at the door. Anthea opened it and in walked the Psammead.

‘Well,’ it said, when it had heard the news, ‘things might be worse. Only you won’t be surprised if you have a few adventures before you get the other half. You want to get it, of course.’

‘Rather,’ was the general reply. ‘And we don’t mind adventures.’

‘No,’ said the Psammead, ‘I seem to remember that about you. Well, sit down and listen with all your ears. Eight, are there? Right—I am glad you know arithmetic. Now pay attention, because I don’t intend to tell you everything twice over.’

As the children settled themselves on the floor—it was far more comfortable than the chairs, as well as more polite to the Psammead, who was stroking its whiskers on the hearth-rug—a sudden cold pain caught at Anthea’s heart. Father—Mother—the darling Lamb—all far away. Then a warm, comfortable feeling flowed through her. The Psammead was here, and at least half a charm, and there were to be adventures. (If you don’t know what a cold pain is, I am glad for your sakes, and I hope you never may.)

‘Now,’ said the Psammead cheerily, ‘you are not particularly nice, nor particularly clever, and you’re not at all good-looking. Still, you’ve saved my life—oh, when I think of that man and his pail of water!—so I’ll tell you all I know. At least, of course I can’t do that, because I know far too much. But I’ll tell you all I know about this red thing.’

‘Do! Do! Do! Do!’ said everyone.

‘Well, then,’ said the Psammead. ‘This thing is half of an Amulet that can do all sorts of things; it can make the corn grow, and the waters flow, and the trees bear fruit, and the little new beautiful babies come. (Not that babies ARE beautiful, of course,’ it broke off to say, ‘but their mothers think they are—and as long as you think a thing’s true it IS true as far as you’re concerned.)’

Robert yawned.

The Psammead went on.

‘The complete Amulet can keep off all the things that make people unhappy—jealousy, bad temper, pride, disagreeableness, greediness, selfishness, laziness. Evil spirits, people called them when the Amulet was made. Don’t you think it would be nice to have it?’

‘Very,’ said the children, quite without enthusiasm.

‘And it can give you strength and courage.’

‘That’s better,’ said Cyril.

‘And virtue.’

‘I suppose it’s nice to have that,’ said Jane, but not with much interest.

‘And it can give you your heart’s desire.’

‘Now you’re talking,’ said Robert.

‘Of course I am,’ retorted the Psammead tartly, ‘so there’s no need for you to.’

‘Heart’s desire is good enough for me,’ said Cyril.

‘Yes, but,’ Anthea ventured, ‘all that’s what the WHOLE charm can do. There’s something that the half we’ve got can win off its own bat— isn’t there?’ She appealed to the Psammead. It nodded.

‘Yes,’ it said; ‘the half has the power to take you anywhere you like to look for the other half.’

This seemed a brilliant prospect till Robert asked—

‘Does it know where to look?’

The Psammead shook its head and answered, ‘I don’t think it’s likely.’

‘Do you?’

‘No.’

‘Then,’ said Robert, ‘we might as well look for a needle in a bottle of hay. Yes—it IS bottle, and not bundle, Father said so.’

‘Not at all,’ said the Psammead briskly-, ‘you think you know everything, but you are quite mistaken. The first thing is to get the thing to talk.’

‘Can it?’ Jane questioned. Jane’s question did not mean that she thought it couldn’t, for in spite of the parlour furniture the feeling of magic was growing deeper and thicker, and seemed to fill the room like a dream of a scented fog.

‘Of course it can. I suppose you can read.’

‘Oh yes!’ Everyone was rather hurt at the question.

‘Well, then—all you’ve got to do is to read the name that’s written on the part of the charm that you’ve got. And as soon as you say the name out loud the thing will have power to do—well, several things.’

There was a silence. The red charm was passed from hand to hand.

‘There’s no name on it,’ said Cyril at last.

‘Nonsense,’ said the Psammead; ‘what’s that?’

‘Oh, THAT!’ said Cyril, ‘it’s not reading. It looks like pictures of chickens and snakes and things.’

This was what was on the charm: [Hieroglyphics omitted.]

‘I’ve no patience with you,’ said the Psammead; ‘if you can’t read you must find some one who can. A priest now?’

‘We don’t know any priests,’ said Anthea; ‘we know a clergyman—he’s called a priest in the prayer-book, you know—but he only knows Greek and Latin and Hebrew, and this isn’t any of those—I know.’

The Psammead stamped a furry foot angrily.

‘I wish I’d never seen you,’ it said; ‘you aren’t any more good than so many stone images. Not so much, if I’m to tell the truth. Is there no wise man in your Babylon who can pronounce the names of the Great Ones?’

‘There’s a poor learned gentleman upstairs,’ said Anthea, ‘we might try him. He has a lot of stone images in his room, and iron-looking ones too—we peeped in once when he was out. Old Nurse says he doesn’t eat enough to keep a canary alive. He spends it all on stones and things.’

‘Try him,’ said the Psammead, ‘only be careful. If he knows a greater name than this and uses it against you, your charm will be of no use. Bind him first with the chains of honour and upright dealing. And then ask his aid—oh, yes, you’d better all go; you can put me to sand as you go upstairs. I must have a few minutes’ peace and quietness.’

So the four children hastily washed their hands and brushed their hair—this was Anthea’s idea—and went up to knock at the door of the ‘poor learned gentleman’, and to ‘bind him with the chains of honour and upright dealing’.

CHAPTER 3. THE PAST

The learned gentleman had let his dinner get quite cold. It was mutton chop, and as it lay on the plate it looked like a brown island in the middle of a frozen pond, because the grease of the gravy had become cold, and consequently white. It looked very nasty, and it was the first thing the children saw when, after knocking three times and receiving no reply, one of them ventured to turn the handle and softly to open the door. The chop was on the end of a long table that ran down one side of the room. The table had images on it and queer-shaped stones, and books. And there were glass cases fixed against the wall behind, with little strange things in them. The cases were rather like the ones you see in jewellers' shops.

The 'poor learned gentleman' was sitting at a table in the window, looking at something very small which he held in a pair of fine pincers. He had a round spy-glass sort of thing in one eye—which reminded the children of watchmakers, and also of the long snail's eyes of the Psammead. The gentleman was very long and thin, and his long, thin boots stuck out under the other side of his table. He did not hear the door open, and the children stood hesitating. At last Robert gave the door a push, and they all started back, for in the middle of the wall that the door had hidden was a mummy-case—very, very, very big—painted in red and yellow and green and black, and the face of it seemed to look at them quite angrily.

You know what a mummy-case is like, of course? If you don't you had better go to the British Museum at once and find out. Anyway, it is not at all the sort of thing that you expect to meet in a top-floor front in Bloomsbury, looking as though it would like to know what business YOU had there.

So everyone said, 'Oh!' rather loud, and their boots clattered as they stumbled back.

The learned gentleman took the glass out of his eye and said—'I beg your pardon,' in a very soft, quiet pleasant voice—the voice of a gentleman who has been to Oxford.

'It's us that beg yours,' said Cyril politely. 'We are sorry to disturb you.'

'Come in,' said the gentleman, rising—with the most distinguished courtesy, Anthea told herself. 'I am delighted to see you. Won't you sit down? No, not there; allow me to move that papyrus.'

He cleared a chair, and stood smiling and looking kindly through his large, round spectacles.

'He treats us like grown-ups,' whispered Robert, 'and he doesn't seem to know how many of us there are.'

'Hush,' said Anthea, 'it isn't manners to whisper. You say, Cyril—go ahead.'

'We're very sorry to disturb you,' said Cyril politely, 'but we did knock three times, and you didn't say "Come in", or "Run away now", or that you couldn't be bothered just now, or to come when you weren't so busy, or any of the things people do say when you knock at doors, so we opened it. We knew you were in because we heard you sneeze while we were waiting.'

'Not at all,' said the gentleman; 'do sit down.'

'He has found out there are four of us,' said Robert, as the gentleman cleared three more chairs. He put the things off them carefully on the floor. The first chair had things like bricks that tiny, tiny birds' feet have walked over when the bricks were soft, only the marks were in regular lines. The second chair had round things on it like very large, fat, long, pale beads. And the last chair had a pile of dusty papers on it. The children sat down.

'We know you are very, very learned,' said Cyril, 'and we have got a charm, and we want you to read the name on it, because it isn't in Latin or Greek, or Hebrew, or any of the languages WE know—'

'A thorough knowledge of even those languages is a very fair foundation on which to build an education,' said the gentleman politely.

'Oh!' said Cyril blushing, 'but we only know them to look at, except Latin—and I'm only in Caesar with that.' The gentleman took off his spectacles and laughed. His laugh sounded rusty, Cyril thought, as though it wasn't often used.

‘Of course!’ he said. ‘I’m sure I beg your pardon. I think I must have been in a dream. You are the children who live downstairs, are you not? Yes. I have seen you as I have passed in and out. And you have found something that you think to be an antiquity, and you’ve brought it to show me? That was very kind. I should like to inspect it.’

‘I’m afraid we didn’t think about your liking to inspect it,’ said the truthful Anthea. ‘It was just for US because we wanted to know the name on it—’

‘Oh, yes—and, I say,’ Robert interjected, ‘you won’t think it rude of us if we ask you first, before we show it, to be bound in the what-do-you-call-it of—’

‘In the bonds of honour and upright dealing,’ said Anthea.

‘I’m afraid I don’t quite follow you,’ said the gentleman, with gentle nervousness.

‘Well, it’s this way,’ said Cyril. ‘We’ve got part of a charm. And the Sammy—I mean, something told us it would work, though it’s only half a one; but it won’t work unless we can say the name that’s on it. But, of course, if you’ve got another name that can lick ours, our charm will be no go; so we want you to give us your word of honour as a gentleman—though I’m sure, now I’ve seen you, that it’s not necessary; but still I’ve promised to ask you, so we must. Will you please give us your honourable word not to say any name stronger than the name on our charm?’

The gentleman had put on his spectacles again and was looking at Cyril through them. He now said: ‘Bless me!’ more than once, adding, ‘Who told you all this?’

‘I can’t tell you,’ said Cyril. ‘I’m very sorry, but I can’t.’

Some faint memory of a far-off childhood must have come to the learned gentleman just then, for he smiled. ‘I see,’ he said. ‘It is some sort of game that you are engaged in? Of course! Yes! Well, I will certainly promise. Yet I wonder how you heard of the names of power?’

‘We can’t tell you that either,’ said Cyril; and Anthea said, ‘Here is our charm,’ and held it out.

With politeness, but without interest, the gentleman took it. But after the first glance all his body suddenly stiffened, as a pointer’s does when he sees a partridge.

‘Excuse me,’ he said in quite a changed voice, and carried the charm to the window. He looked at it; he turned it over. He fixed his spy-glass in his eye and looked again. No one said anything. Only Robert made a shuffling noise with his feet till Anthea nudged him to shut up. At last the learned gentleman drew a long breath.

‘Where did you find this?’ he asked.

‘We didn’t find it. We bought it at a shop. Jacob Absalom the name is—not far from Charing Cross,’ said Cyril.

‘We gave seven-and-sixpence for it,’ added Jane.

‘It is not for sale, I suppose? You do not wish to part with it?’

I ought to tell you that it is extremely valuable—extraordinarily valuable, I may say.’

‘Yes,’ said Cyril, ‘we know that, so of course we want to keep it.’

‘Keep it carefully, then,’ said the gentleman impressively; ‘and if ever you should wish to part with it, may I ask you to give me the refusal of it?’

‘The refusal?’

‘I mean, do not sell it to anyone else until you have given me the opportunity of buying it.’

‘All right,’ said Cyril, ‘we won’t. But we don’t want to sell it. We want to make it do things.’

‘I suppose you can play at that as well as at anything else,’ said the gentleman; ‘but I’m afraid the days of magic are over.’

‘They aren’t REALLY,’ said Anthea earnestly. ‘You’d see they aren’t if I could tell you about our last summer holidays. Only I mustn’t. Thank you very much. And can you read the name?’

‘Yes, I can read it.’

‘Will you tell it us?’ ‘The name,’ said the gentleman, ‘is Ur Hekau Setcheh.’

‘Ur Hekau Setcheh,’ repeated Cyril. ‘Thanks awfully. I do hope we haven’t taken up too much of your time.’

‘Not at all,’ said the gentleman. ‘And do let me entreat you to be very, very careful of that most valuable specimen.’

They said ‘Thank you’ in all the different polite ways they could think of, and filed out of the door and down the stairs. Anthea was last. Half-way down to the first landing she turned and ran up again.

The door was still open, and the learned gentleman and the mummy-case were standing opposite to each other, and both looked as though they had stood like that for years.

The gentleman started when Anthea put her hand on his arm.

‘I hope you won’t be cross and say it’s not my business,’ she said, ‘but do look at your chop! Don’t you think you ought to eat it? Father forgets his dinner sometimes when he’s writing, and Mother always says I ought to remind him if she’s not at home to do it herself, because it’s so bad to miss your regular meals.’

So I thought perhaps you wouldn’t mind my reminding you, because you don’t seem to have anyone else to do it.’

She glanced at the mummy-case; IT certainly did not look as though it would ever think of reminding people of their meals.

The learned gentleman looked at her for a moment before he said—

‘Thank you, my dear. It was a kindly thought. No, I haven’t anyone to remind me about things like that.’

He sighed, and looked at the chop.

‘It looks very nasty,’ said Anthea.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it does. I’ll eat it immediately, before I forget.’

As he ate it he sighed more than once. Perhaps because the chop was nasty, perhaps because he longed for the charm which the children did not want to sell, perhaps because it was so long since anyone cared whether he ate his chops or forgot them.

Anthea caught the others at the stair-foot. They woke the Psammead, and it taught them exactly how to use the word of power, and to make the charm speak. I am not going to tell you how this is done, because you might try to do it. And for you any such trying would be almost sure to end in disappointment. Because in the first place it is a thousand million to one against your ever getting hold of the right sort of charm, and if you did, there would be hardly any chance at all of your finding a learned gentleman clever enough and kind enough to read the word for you.

The children and the Psammead crouched in a circle on the floor—in the girls’ bedroom, because in the parlour they might have been interrupted by old Nurse’s coming in to lay the cloth for tea—and the charm was put in the middle of the circle.

The sun shone splendidly outside, and the room was very light. Through the open window came the hum and rattle of London, and in the street below they could hear the voice of the milkman.

When all was ready, the Psammead signed to Anthea to say the word. And she said it. Instantly the whole light of all the world seemed to go out. The room was dark. The world outside was dark—darker than the darkest night that ever was. And all the sounds went out too, so that there was a silence deeper than any silence you have ever even dreamed of imagining. It was like being suddenly deaf and blind, only darker and quieter even than that.

But before the children had got over the sudden shock of it enough to be frightened, a faint, beautiful light began to show in the middle of the circle, and at the same moment a faint, beautiful voice began to speak. The light was too small for one to see anything by, and the voice was too small for you to hear what it said. You could just see the light and just hear the voice.

But the light grew stronger. It was greeny, like glow-worms’ lamps, and it grew and grew till it was as though thousands and thousands of glow-worms were signalling to their winged sweethearts from the middle of the circle. And the voice grew, not so much in loudness as in sweetness (though it grew louder, too), till it was so sweet that you wanted to cry with pleasure just at the sound of it. It

was like nightingales, and the sea, and the fiddle, and the voice of your mother when you have been a long time away, and she meets you at the door when you get home.

And the voice said—

‘Speak. What is it that you would hear?’

I cannot tell you what language the voice used. I only know that everyone present understood it perfectly. If you come to think of it, there must be some language that everyone could understand, if we only knew what it was. Nor can I tell you how the charm spoke, nor whether it was the charm that spoke, or some presence in the charm. The children could not have told you either. Indeed, they could not look at the charm while it was speaking, because the light was too bright. They looked instead at the green radiance on the faded Kidderminster carpet at the edge of the circle. They all felt very quiet, and not inclined to ask questions or fidget with their feet. For this was not like the things that had happened in the country when the Psammead had given them their wishes. That had been funny somehow, and this was not. It was something like Arabian Nights magic, and something like being in church. No one cared to speak.

It was Cyril who said at last—

‘Please we want to know where the other half of the charm is.’

‘The part of the Amulet which is lost,’ said the beautiful voice, ‘was broken and ground into the dust of the shrine that held it. It and the pin that joined the two halves are themselves dust, and the dust is scattered over many lands and sunk in many seas.’

‘Oh, I say!’ murmured Robert, and a blank silence fell. ‘Then it’s all up?’ said Cyril at last; ‘it’s no use our looking for a thing that’s smashed into dust, and the dust scattered all over the place.’

‘If you would find it,’ said the voice, ‘You must seek it where it still is, perfect as ever.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Cyril.

‘In the Past you may find it,’ said the voice.

‘I wish we MAY find it,’ said Cyril.

The Psammead whispered crossly, ‘Don’t you understand? The thing existed in the Past. If you were in the Past, too, you could find it. It’s very difficult to make you understand things. Time and space are only forms of thought.’

‘I see,’ said Cyril.

‘No, you don’t,’ said the Psammead, ‘and it doesn’t matter if you don’t, either. What I mean is that if you were only made the right way, you could see everything happening in the same place at the same time. Now do you see?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t,’ said Anthea; ‘I’m sorry I’m so stupid.’

‘Well, at any rate, you see this. That lost half of the Amulet is in the Past. Therefore it’s in the Past we must look for it. I mustn’t speak to the charm myself. Ask it things! Find out!’

‘Where can we find the other part of you?’ asked Cyril obediently.

‘In the Past,’ said the voice.

‘What part of the Past?’

‘I may not tell you. If you will choose a time, I will take you to the place that then held it. You yourselves must find it.’

‘When did you see it last?’ asked Anthea—‘I mean, when was it taken away from you?’

The beautiful voice answered—

‘That was thousands of years ago. The Amulet was perfect then, and lay in a shrine, the last of many shrines, and I worked wonders. Then came strange men with strange weapons and destroyed my shrine, and the Amulet they bore away with many captives. But of these, one, my priest, knew the word of power, and spoke it for me, so that the Amulet became invisible, and thus returned to my shrine, but the shrine was broken down, and ere any magic could rebuild it one spoke a word before which my power bowed down and was still. And the Amulet lay there, still perfect, but enslaved. Then one coming with stones to rebuild the shrine, dropped a hewn stone on the Amulet as it lay,

and one half was sundered from the other. I had no power to seek for that which was lost. And there being none to speak the word of power, I could not rejoin it. So the Amulet lay in the dust of the desert many thousand years, and at last came a small man, a conqueror with an army, and after him a crowd of men who sought to seem wise, and one of these found half the Amulet and brought it to this land. But none could read the name. So I lay still. And this man dying and his son after him, the Amulet was sold by those who came after to a merchant, and from him you bought it, and it is here, and now, the name of power having been spoken, I also am here.'

This is what the voice said. I think it must have meant Napoleon by the small man, the conqueror. Because I know I have been told that he took an army to Egypt, and that afterwards a lot of wise people went grubbing in the sand, and fished up all sorts of wonderful things, older than you would think possible. And of these I believe this charm to have been one, and the most wonderful one of all.

Everyone listened: and everyone tried to think. It is not easy to do this clearly when you have been listening to the kind of talk I have told you about.

At last Robert said—

'Can you take us into the Past—to the shrine where you and the other thing were together. If you could take us there, we might find the other part still there after all these thousands of years.'

'Still there? silly!' said Cyril. 'Don't you see, if we go back into the Past it won't be thousands of years ago. It will be NOW for us—won't it?' He appealed to the Psammead, who said—

'You're not so far off the idea as you usually are!'

'Well,' said Anthea, 'will you take us back to when there was a shrine and you were safe in it—all of you?'

'Yes,' said the voice. 'You must hold me up, and speak the word of power, and one by one, beginning with the first-born, you shall pass through me into the Past. But let the last that passes be the one that holds me, and let him not lose his hold, lest you lose me, and so remain in the Past for ever.'

'That's a nasty idea,' said Robert.

'When you desire to return,' the beautiful voice went on, 'hold me up towards the East, and speak the word. Then, passing through me, you shall return to this time and it shall be the present to you.'

'But how—' A bell rang loudly.

'Oh crikey!' exclaimed Robert, 'that's tea! Will you please make it proper daylight again so that we can go down. And thank you so much for all your kindness.'

'We've enjoyed ourselves very much indeed, thank you!' added Anthea politely.

The beautiful light faded slowly. The great darkness and silence came and these suddenly changed to the dazzlement of day and the great soft, rustling sound of London, that is like some vast beast turning over in its sleep.

The children rubbed their eyes, the Psammead ran quickly to its sandy bath, and the others went down to tea. And until the cups were actually filled tea seemed less real than the beautiful voice and the greeny light.

After tea Anthea persuaded the others to allow her to hang the charm round her neck with a piece of string.

'It would be so awful if it got lost,' she said: 'it might get lost anywhere, you know, and it would be rather beastly for us to have to stay in the Past for ever and ever, wouldn't it?'

CHAPTER 4. EIGHT THOUSAND YEARS AGO

Next morning Anthea got old Nurse to allow her to take up the 'poor learned gentleman's' breakfast. He did not recognize her at first, but when he did he was vaguely pleased to see her.

'You see I'm wearing the charm round my neck,' she said; 'I'm taking care of it—like you told us to.'

'That's right,' said he; 'did you have a good game last night?'

'You will eat your breakfast before it's cold, won't you?' said Anthea. 'Yes, we had a splendid time. The charm made it all dark, and then greeny light, and then it spoke. Oh! I wish you could have heard it—it was such a darling voice—and it told us the other half of it was lost in the Past, so of course we shall have to look for it there!'

The learned gentleman rubbed his hair with both hands and looked anxiously at Anthea.

'I suppose it's natural—youthful imagination and so forth,' he said. 'Yet someone must have... Who told you that some part of the charm was missing?'

'I can't tell you,' she said. 'I know it seems most awfully rude, especially after being so kind about telling us the name of power, and all that, but really, I'm not allowed to tell anybody anything about the—the—the person who told me. You won't forget your breakfast, will you?'

The learned gentleman smiled feebly and then frowned—not a cross-frown, but a puzzle-frown.

'Thank you,' he said, 'I shall always be pleased if you'll look in—any time you're passing you know—at least...'

'I will,' she said; 'goodbye. I'll always tell you anything I MAY tell.'

He had not had many adventures with children in them, and he wondered whether all children were like these. He spent quite five minutes in wondering before he settled down to the fifty-second chapter of his great book on 'The Secret Rites of the Priests of Amen Ra'.

It is no use to pretend that the children did not feel a good deal of agitation at the thought of going through the charm into the Past. That idea, that perhaps they might stay in the Past and never get back again, was anything but pleasing. Yet no one would have dared to suggest that the charm should not be used; and though each was in its heart very frightened indeed, they would all have joined in jeering at the cowardice of any one of them who should have uttered the timid but natural suggestion, 'Don't let's!'

It seemed necessary to make arrangements for being out all day, for there was no reason to suppose that the sound of the dinner-bell would be able to reach back into the Past, and it seemed unwise to excite old Nurse's curiosity when nothing they could say—not even the truth—could in any way satisfy it. They were all very proud to think how well they had understood what the charm and the Psammead had said about Time and Space and things like that, and they were perfectly certain that it would be quite impossible to make old Nurse understand a single word of it. So they merely asked her to let them take their dinner out into Regent's Park—and this, with the implied cold mutton and tomatoes, was readily granted.

'You can get yourselves some buns or sponge-cakes, or whatever you fancy-like,' said old Nurse, giving Cyril a shilling. 'Don't go getting jam-tarts, now—so messy at the best of times, and without forks and plates ruination to your clothes, besides your not being able to wash your hands and faces afterwards.'

So Cyril took the shilling, and they all started off. They went round by the Tottenham Court Road to buy a piece of waterproof sheeting to put over the Psammead in case it should be raining in the Past when they got there. For it is almost certain death to a Psammead to get wet.

The sun was shining very brightly, and even London looked pretty. Women were selling roses from big baskets-full, and Anthea bought four roses, one each, for herself and the others. They were red roses and smelt of summer—the kind of roses you always want so desperately at about Christmas-

time when you can only get mistletoe, which is pale right through to its very scent, and holly which pricks your nose if you try to smell it. So now everyone had a rose in its buttonhole, and soon everyone was sitting on the grass in Regent's Park under trees whose leaves would have been clean, clear green in the country, but here were dusty and yellowish, and brown at the edges.

'We've got to go on with it,' said Anthea, 'and as the eldest has to go first, you'll have to be last, Jane. You quite understand about holding on to the charm as you go through, don't you, Pussy?'

'I wish I hadn't got to be last,' said Jane.

'You shall carry the Psammead if you like,' said Anthea. 'That is,' she added, remembering the beast's queer temper, 'if it'll let you.'

The Psammead, however, was unexpectedly amiable.

'I don't mind,' it said, 'who carries me, so long as it doesn't drop me. I can't bear being dropped.'

Jane with trembling hands took the Psammead and its fish-basket under one arm. The charm's long string was hung round her neck. Then they all stood up. Jane held out the charm at arm's length, and Cyril solemnly pronounced the word of power.

As he spoke it the charm grew tall and broad, and he saw that Jane was just holding on to the edge of a great red arch of very curious shape. The opening of the arch was small, but Cyril saw that he could go through it. All round and beyond the arch were the faded trees and trampled grass of Regent's Park, where the little ragged children were playing Ring-o'-Roses. But through the opening of it shone a blaze of blue and yellow and red. Cyril drew a long breath and stiffened his legs so that the others should not see that his knees were trembling and almost knocking together. 'Here goes!' he said, and, stepping up through the arch, disappeared. Then followed Anthea. Robert, coming next, held fast, at Anthea's suggestion, to the sleeve of Jane, who was thus dragged safely through the arch. And as soon as they were on the other side of the arch there was no more arch at all and no more Regent's Park either, only the charm in Jane's hand, and it was its proper size again. They were now in a light so bright that they winked and blinked and rubbed their eyes. During this dazzling interval Anthea felt for the charm and pushed it inside Jane's frock, so that it might be quite safe. When their eyes got used to the new wonderful light the children looked around them. The sky was very, very blue, and it sparkled and glittered and dazzled like the sea at home when the sun shines on it.

They were standing on a little clearing in a thick, low forest; there were trees and shrubs and a close, thorny, tangly undergrowth. In front of them stretched a bank of strange black mud, then came the brownish-yellow shining ribbon of a river. Then more dry, caked mud and more greenish-brown jungle. The only things that told that human people had been there were the clearing, a path that led to it, and an odd arrangement of cut reeds in the river.

They looked at each other.

'Well!' said Robert, 'this IS a change of air!'

It was. The air was hotter than they could have imagined, even in London in August.

'I wish I knew where we were,' said Cyril.

'Here's a river, now—I wonder whether it's the Amazon or the Tiber, or what.'

'It's the Nile,' said the Psammead, looking out of the fish-bag.

'Then this is Egypt,' said Robert, who had once taken a geography prize.

'I don't see any crocodiles,' Cyril objected. His prize had been for natural history.

The Psammead reached out a hairy arm from its basket and pointed to a heap of mud at the edge of the water.

'What do you call that?' it said; and as it spoke the heap of mud slid into the river just as a slab of damp mixed mortar will slip from a bricklayer's trowel.

'Oh!' said everybody.

There was a crashing among the reeds on the other side of the water.

'And there's a river-horse!' said the Psammead, as a great beast like an enormous slaty-blue slug showed itself against the black bank on the far side of the stream.

‘It’s a hippopotamus,’ said Cyril; ‘it seems much more real somehow than the one at the Zoo, doesn’t it?’

‘I’m glad it’s being real on the other side of the river,’ said Jane. And now there was a crackling of reeds and twigs behind them. This was horrible. Of course it might be another hippopotamus, or a crocodile, or a lion—or, in fact, almost anything.

‘Keep your hand on the charm, Jane,’ said Robert hastily. ‘We ought to have a means of escape handy. I’m dead certain this is the sort of place where simply anything might happen to us.’

‘I believe a hippopotamus is going to happen to us,’ said Jane—‘a very, very big one.’

They had all turned to face the danger.

‘Don’t be silly little duffers,’ said the Psammead in its friendly, informal way; ‘it’s not a river-horse. It’s a human.’

It was. It was a girl—of about Anthea’s age. Her hair was short and fair, and though her skin was tanned by the sun, you could see that it would have been fair too if it had had a chance. She had every chance of being tanned, for she had no clothes to speak of, and the four English children, carefully dressed in frocks, hats, shoes, stockings, coats, collars, and all the rest of it, envied her more than any words of theirs or of mine could possibly say. There was no doubt that here was the right costume for that climate.

She carried a pot on her head, of red and black earthenware. She did not see the children, who shrank back against the edge of the jungle, and she went forward to the brink of the river to fill her pitcher. As she went she made a strange sort of droning, humming, melancholy noise all on two notes. Anthea could not help thinking that perhaps the girl thought this noise was singing.

The girl filled the pitcher and set it down by the river bank. Then she waded into the water and stooped over the circle of cut reeds. She pulled half a dozen fine fish out of the water within the reeds, killing each as she took it out, and threading it on a long osier that she carried. Then she knotted the osier, hung it on her arm, picked up the pitcher, and turned to come back. And as she turned she saw the four children. The white dresses of Jane and Anthea stood out like snow against the dark forest background. She screamed and the pitcher fell, and the water was spilled out over the hard mud surface and over the fish, which had fallen too. Then the water slowly trickled away into the deep cracks.

‘Don’t be frightened,’ Anthea cried, ‘we won’t hurt you.’

‘Who are you?’ said the girl.

Now, once for all, I am not going to be bothered to tell you how it was that the girl could understand Anthea and Anthea could understand the girl. YOU, at any rate, would not understand ME, if I tried to explain it, any more than you can understand about time and space being only forms of thought. You may think what you like. Perhaps the children had found out the universal language which everyone can understand, and which wise men so far have not found. You will have noticed long ago that they were singularly lucky children, and they may have had this piece of luck as well as others. Or it may have been that... but why pursue the question further? The fact remains that in all their adventures the muddle-headed inventions which we call foreign languages never bothered them in the least. They could always understand and be understood. If you can explain this, please do. I daresay I could understand your explanation, though you could never understand mine.

So when the girl said, ‘Who are you?’ everyone understood at once, and Anthea replied—

‘We are children—just like you. Don’t be frightened. Won’t you show us where you live?’

Jane put her face right into the Psammead’s basket, and burrowed her mouth into its fur to whisper—

‘Is it safe? Won’t they eat us? Are they cannibals?’

The Psammead shrugged its fur.

‘Don’t make your voice buzz like that, it tickles my ears,’ it said rather crossly. ‘You can always get back to Regent’s Park in time if you keep fast hold of the charm,’ it said.

The strange girl was trembling with fright.

Anthea had a bangle on her arm. It was a sevenpenny-halfpenny trumpery thing that pretended to be silver; it had a glass heart of turquoise blue hanging from it, and it was the gift of the maid-of-all-work at the Fitzroy Street house. 'Here,' said Anthea, 'this is for you. That is to show we will not hurt you. And if you take it I shall know that you won't hurt us.'

The girl held out her hand. Anthea slid the bangle over it, and the girl's face lighted up with the joy of possession.

'Come,' she said, looking lovingly at the bangle; 'it is peace between your house and mine.'

She picked up her fish and pitcher and led the way up the narrow path by which she had come and the others followed.

'This is something like!' said Cyril, trying to be brave.

'Yes!' said Robert, also assuming a boldness he was far from feeling, 'this really and truly IS an adventure! Its being in the Past makes it quite different from the Phoenix and Carpet happenings.'

The belt of thick-growing acacia trees and shrubs—mostly prickly and unpleasant-looking—seemed about half a mile across. The path was narrow and the wood dark. At last, ahead, daylight shone through the boughs and leaves.

The whole party suddenly came out of the wood's shadow into the glare of the sunlight that shone on a great stretch of yellow sand, dotted with heaps of grey rocks where spiky cactus plants showed gaudy crimson and pink flowers among their shabby, sand-peppered leaves. Away to the right was something that looked like a grey-brown hedge, and from beyond it blue smoke went up to the bluer sky. And over all the sun shone till you could hardly bear your clothes.

'That is where I live,' said the girl pointing.

'I won't go,' whispered Jane into the basket, 'unless you say it's all right.'

The Psammead ought to have been touched by this proof of confidence. Perhaps, however, it looked upon it as a proof of doubt, for it merely snarled—

'If you don't go now I'll never help you again.'

'OH,' whispered Anthea, 'dear Jane, don't! Think of Father and Mother and all of us getting our heart's desire. And we can go back any minute. Come on!'

'Besides,' said Cyril, in a low voice, 'the Psammead must know there's no danger or it wouldn't go. It's not so over and above brave itself. Come on!'

This Jane at last consented to do.

As they got nearer to the brown fence they saw that it was a great hedge about eight feet high, made of piled-up thorn bushes.

'What's that for?' asked Cyril.

'To keep out foes and wild beasts,' said the girl.

'I should think it ought to, too,' said he. 'Why, some of the thorns are as long as my foot.'

There was an opening in the hedge, and they followed the girl through it. A little way further on was another hedge, not so high, also of dry thorn bushes, very prickly and spiteful-looking, and within this was a sort of village of huts.

There were no gardens and no roads. Just huts built of wood and twigs and clay, and roofed with great palm-leaves, dumped down anywhere. The doors of these houses were very low, like the doors of dog-kennels. The ground between them was not paths or streets, but just yellow sand trampled very hard and smooth.

In the middle of the village there was a hedge that enclosed what seemed to be a piece of ground about as big as their own garden in Camden Town.

No sooner were the children well within the inner thorn hedge than dozens of men and women and children came crowding round from behind and inside the huts.

The girl stood protectingly in front of the four children, and said—

‘They are wonder-children from beyond the desert. They bring marvellous gifts, and I have said that it is peace between us and them.’

She held out her arm with the Lowther Arcade bangle on it.

The children from London, where nothing now surprises anyone, had never before seen so many people look so astonished.

They crowded round the children, touching their clothes, their shoes, the buttons on the boys’ jackets, and the coral of the girls’ necklaces.

‘Do say something,’ whispered Anthea.

‘We come,’ said Cyril, with some dim remembrance of a dreadful day when he had had to wait in an outer office while his father interviewed a solicitor, and there had been nothing to read but the Daily Telegraph—‘we come from the world where the sun never sets. And peace with honour is what we want. We are the great Anglo-Saxon or conquering race. Not that we want to conquer YOU,’ he added hastily. ‘We only want to look at your houses and your—well, at all you’ve got here, and then we shall return to our own place, and tell of all that we have seen so that your name may be famed.’

Cyril’s speech didn’t keep the crowd from pressing round and looking as eagerly as ever at the clothing of the children. Anthea had an idea that these people had never seen woven stuff before, and she saw how wonderful and strange it must seem to people who had never had any clothes but the skins of beasts. The sewing, too, of modern clothes seemed to astonish them very much. They must have been able to sew themselves, by the way, for men who seemed to be the chiefs wore knickerbockers of goat-skin or deer-skin, fastened round the waist with twisted strips of hide. And the women wore long skimpy skirts of animals’ skins. The people were not very tall, their hair was fair, and men and women both had it short. Their eyes were blue, and that seemed odd in Egypt. Most of them were tattooed like sailors, only more roughly.

‘What is this? What is this?’ they kept asking touching the children’s clothes curiously.

Anthea hastily took off Jane’s frilly lace collar and handed it to the woman who seemed most friendly.

‘Take this,’ she said, ‘and look at it. And leave us alone. We want to talk among ourselves.’

She spoke in the tone of authority which she had always found successful when she had not time to coax her baby brother to do as he was told. The tone was just as successful now. The children were left together and the crowd retreated. It paused a dozen yards away to look at the lace collar and to go on talking as hard as it could.

The children will never know what those people said, though they knew well enough that they, the four strangers, were the subject of the talk. They tried to comfort themselves by remembering the girl’s promise of friendliness, but of course the thought of the charm was more comfortable than anything else. They sat down on the sand in the shadow of the hedged-round place in the middle of the village, and now for the first time they were able to look about them and to see something more than a crowd of eager, curious faces.

They here noticed that the women wore necklaces made of beads of different coloured stone, and from these hung pendants of odd, strange shapes, and some of them had bracelets of ivory and flint.

‘I say,’ said Robert, ‘what a lot we could teach them if we stayed here!’

‘I expect they could teach us something too,’ said Cyril. ‘Did you notice that flint bracelet the woman had that Anthea gave the collar to? That must have taken some making. Look here, they’ll get suspicious if we talk among ourselves, and I do want to know about how they do things. Let’s get the girl to show us round, and we can be thinking about how to get the Amulet at the same time. Only mind, we must keep together.’

Anthea beckoned to the girl, who was standing a little way off looking wistfully at them, and she came gladly.

‘Tell us how you make the bracelets, the stone ones,’ said Cyril.

‘With other stones,’ said the girl; ‘the men make them; we have men of special skill in such work.’

‘Haven’t you any iron tools?’

‘Iron,’ said the girl, ‘I don’t know what you mean.’ It was the first word she had not understood.

‘Are all your tools of flint?’ asked Cyril. ‘Of course,’ said the girl, opening her eyes wide.

I wish I had time to tell you of that talk. The English children wanted to hear all about this new place, but they also wanted to tell of their own country. It was like when you come back from your holidays and you want to hear and to tell everything at the same time. As the talk went on there were more and more words that the girl could not understand, and the children soon gave up the attempt to explain to her what their own country was like, when they began to see how very few of the things they had always thought they could not do without were really not at all necessary to life.

The girl showed them how the huts were made—indeed, as one was being made that very day she took them to look at it. The way of building was very different from ours. The men stuck long pieces of wood into a piece of ground the size of the hut they wanted to make. These were about eight inches apart; then they put in another row about eight inches away from the first, and then a third row still further out. Then all the space between was filled up with small branches and twigs, and then daubed over with black mud worked with the feet till it was soft and sticky like putty.

The girl told them how the men went hunting with flint spears and arrows, and how they made boats with reeds and clay. Then she explained the reed thing in the river that she had taken the fish out of. It was a fish-trap—just a ring of reeds set up in the water with only one little opening in it, and in this opening, just below the water, were stuck reeds slanting the way of the river’s flow, so that the fish, when they had swum sillily in, sillily couldn’t get out again. She showed them the clay pots and jars and platters, some of them ornamented with black and red patterns, and the most wonderful things made of flint and different sorts of stone, beads, and ornaments, and tools and weapons of all sorts and kinds.

‘It is really wonderful,’ said Cyril patronizingly, ‘when you consider that it’s all eight thousand years ago—’

‘I don’t understand you,’ said the girl.

‘It ISN’T eight thousand years ago,’ whispered Jane. ‘It’s NOW—and that’s just what I don’t like about it. I say, DO let’s get home again before anything more happens. You can see for yourselves the charm isn’t here.’

‘What’s in that place in the middle?’ asked Anthea, struck by a sudden thought, and pointing to the fence.

‘That’s the secret sacred place,’ said the girl in a whisper. ‘No one knows what is there. There are many walls, and inside the insidest one IT is, but no one knows what IT is except the headsmen.’

‘I believe YOU know,’ said Cyril, looking at her very hard.

‘I’ll give you this if you’ll tell me,’ said Anthea taking off a bead-ring which had already been much admired.

‘Yes,’ said the girl, catching eagerly at the ring. ‘My father is one of the heads, and I know a water charm to make him talk in his sleep. And he has spoken. I will tell you. But if they know I have told you they will kill me. In the insidest inside there is a stone box, and in it there is the Amulet. None knows whence it came. It came from very far away.’

‘Have you seen it?’ asked Anthea.

The girl nodded.

‘Is it anything like this?’ asked Jane, rashly producing the charm.

The girl’s face turned a sickly greenish-white.

‘Hide it, hide it,’ she whispered. ‘You must put it back. If they see it they will kill us all. You for taking it, and me for knowing that there was such a thing. Oh, woe—woe! why did you ever come here?’

‘Don’t be frightened,’ said Cyril. ‘They shan’t know. Jane, don’t you be such a little jack-ape again—that’s all. You see what will happen if you do. Now, tell me—’ He turned to the girl, but before he had time to speak the question there was a loud shout, and a man bounded in through the opening in the thorn-hedge.

‘Many foes are upon us!’ he cried. ‘Make ready the defences!’

His breath only served for that, and he lay panting on the ground. ‘Oh, DO let’s go home!’ said Jane. ‘Look here—I don’t care—I WILL!’

She held up the charm. Fortunately all the strange, fair people were too busy to notice HER. She held up the charm. And nothing happened.

‘You haven’t said the word of power,’ said Anthea.

Jane hastily said it—and still nothing happened.

‘Hold it up towards the East, you silly!’ said Robert.

‘Which IS the East?’ said Jane, dancing about in her agony of terror.

Nobody knew. So they opened the fish-bag to ask the Psammead.

And the bag had only a waterproof sheet in it.

The Psammead was gone.

‘Hide the sacred thing! Hide it! Hide it!’ whispered the girl.

Cyril shrugged his shoulders, and tried to look as brave as he knew he ought to feel.

‘Hide it up, Pussy,’ he said. ‘We are in for it now. We’ve just got to stay and see it out.’

CHAPTER 5. THE FIGHT IN THE VILLAGE

Here was a horrible position! Four English children, whose proper date was A.D. 1905, and whose proper address was London, set down in Egypt in the year 6000 B.C. with no means whatever of getting back into their own time and place. They could not find the East, and the sun was of no use at the moment, because some officious person had once explained to Cyril that the sun did not really set in the West at all—nor rise in the East either, for the matter of that.

The Psammead had crept out of the bass-bag when they were not looking and had basely deserted them.

An enemy was approaching. There would be a fight. People get killed in fights, and the idea of taking part in a fight was one that did not appeal to the children.

The man who had brought the news of the enemy still lay panting on the sand. His tongue was hanging out, long and red, like a dog's. The people of the village were hurriedly filling the gaps in the fence with thorn-bushes from the heap that seemed to have been piled there ready for just such a need. They lifted the cluster-thorns with long poles—much as men at home, nowadays, lift hay with a fork.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.