THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY

Enchanting Essays on the Wonders, Secrets, and Forgotten Magic of Childhood

by Richard Middleton

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The Day Before Yesterday

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Preface
Message to the Reader

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Introduction

Richard Middleton wrote about childhood the way a smuggler might describe a hidden cove: as a real place he had once known well and could no longer reach by ordinary roads. The Day Before Yesterday gathers thirty-three short pieces about children and the strange, private worlds they build for themselves. A dusty attic cupboard becomes a pirate ship. A railway carriage becomes the whole wide world. A muddy pool in a wood becomes a place where spells might be cast. The grown-ups in these pages are distant figures who never quite grasp what is going on under their noses.

The book is non-fiction, though it moves like a memoir crossed with a series of friendly essays. Its subject is not a plot but a way of seeing, and its pleasure is in how exactly that way of seeing is caught.

Why It Still Delights

Anyone who has ever hidden behind a sofa, turned a stick into a sword, or decided that a certain corner of the garden was not to be walked through has been inside this book already. Middleton's gift is to remember the seriousness of play without sneering at it and without drowning it in sentiment. His children are grave, proud, easily wounded, and quietly sure that they understand things their elders have forgotten. The humor comes from the gap between how important everything feels to them and how little the adults notice.

There is also a pleasure in the company he keeps. The opening pages name Aladdin, Robinson Crusoe, Ben Gunn, and Tom Sawyer as if they were old neighbors, and nod to Kipling, Thackeray, and H. G. Wells along the way. These children are readers, and their games are made from books. Anyone who

grew up on adventure stories will recognize the habit of borrowing a pirate captain for the afternoon.

The author's own story gives the book an extra depth. Richard Middleton was an English writer born in 1882, who worked as a clerk and wrote poems, essays, and short stories on the side. His full name was Richard Barham Middleton, and he was born at Staines, a town on the Thames west of the capital. He was educated at Cranbrook School in Kent and later worked as a clerk at the Royal Exchange Assurance Corporation. Office days of that kind left his evenings free for the writing he cared about. He died young, in 1911, at the age of twenty-nine, in Brussels, and much of his work appeared in books after his death.

He took his own life, and the news came as a shock to the friends he had made in literary circles. Those friends gathered his scattered work for print. Among them was the poet and critic Henry Savage, who wrote a memoir of him, and a collection of his tales called The Ghost Ship brought him a small, lasting following. That fact shadows a collection about the vanished country of early life. Even so, the writing is rarely sad in any heavy way. Its dominant note is amusement, with affection close behind.

The period matters too. Middleton's childhood belonged to the late Victorian years, a time of gaslight, schoolrooms with governesses, trips to the pantomime, and the Crystal Palace with its stone prehistoric animals by the lake. The view is that of a young man looking back on childhood, with its sensations still vivid enough to argue with the practical judgments of adulthood. Street organs still played in the roads, boys' magazines were passed around the schoolroom, and the sea meant the seaside, reached by train. Pickhurst Pond, which appears in these pages, is a real place in Kent, near Hayes.

The title points to that nearness: the day before yesterday is not ancient history. It is just far enough back to be lost, and just close enough to feel in the hands. Behind the whole collection stands the Edwardian habit of writing for a general magazine audience. Essays like these were short enough to be read in a

sitting, and their light touch suited weekly and monthly papers. Middleton had a fine ear for that form, and the book keeps its brisk, conversational shape.

A Cupboard, a Train, a Pool

The book begins with a child's hiding place. A group of brothers and sisters, driven off by the older boys and the lecturing adults, retreat to a low cupboard under the roof of a big attic. The question the book raises right away is what a place like that can become when enough imagination is poured into it.

From there the pieces range widely. Some are about particular things: a long train journey, a pool in a wood, street organs, carol singers, going to bed. Others take up broader themes, such as gardens, pirates, cricket, the theater, the sea, fairies, and education. The tone is conversational and often teasing, with quick turns of mock-heroic language, as when the schoolroom's troublemakers retreat from grown-ups who "descended from Olympus". Sentences can run long and winding, but they are lively, and they nearly always end on a small, sharp joke.

Reading it is easy to do in small doses. Each piece is short and complete in itself, so the book can be taken one essay at a time, or in a rush. Some references are period ones, to old magazines, books, and London sights, but the feeling carries them. Nothing needs to be looked up. A few names are worth knowing for fun, but the games explain themselves.

Middleton likes to use a collective "we" for the children, and sometimes slips into a single boy's point of view. The effect is of someone leaning in to share a family secret.

What the Children Know

A few questions run quietly through the collection. One is where the line falls between what the children invent and what they believe. They are happy to admit a witch, a ghost, or a

drowned kitten into their world, yet they turn away a murderer with a sack and a procession of special tortoises. What rules do they follow, and who decides? Expect a gentle pace. The pieces seldom hurry toward a point, and they are happy to linger over a candle stub, a paper boat, or a jar of dried apple rings.

Another is how the adults look from below. Aunts, governesses, and older brothers are treated with a mixture of pity and amusement. The voice is that of a grown man who remembers exactly how it felt to be small, and he is rarely solemn about it. Humor arrives in small corners, in a parenthetical remark or an unexpectedly formal word set beside a childish one. Paragraphs are often long, built like little journeys that start in one place and end somewhere funnier.

Does Middleton mean the joke only at their expense, or is there a gentler point about what grown-ups have lost? Each of the thirty-three pieces has its own title and subject, so the book does not build a plot. Some pieces describe a single afternoon or a single object, while others reflect on a habit shared by many children. The mood moves between mock-grand adventure, quiet observation, and wistful memory, often within a few pages.

The last question is the one the book's later pages seem designed to raise: what does it mean to look back on childhood at all? Titles such as "Childhood in Retrospect" and "The Folly of Education" suggest that Middleton has views, and the reader is left wondering whether a writer so devoted to the games of the young can still stand a little outside them.

An Enchanted Place

When older brothers insisted on their rights too harshly, or when the grown-ups descended from Olympus with a tiresome account of broken furniture and torn clothes, the schoolroom's groundlings retreated. In summer, this was easy enough; once we had escaped into the garden, any climbable tree or shady shrub offered us a hermitage. There was a hollow tree stump full of exciting insects and pleasant earthy smells that never failed us, or, on wet days, the tool shed, with its arsenal of weapons for repelling imaginary attacks by hostile forces. But in the game of our childhood, the garden was off-limits in winter, and we had to seek other hiding places. Behind the schoolroom piano was a three-cornered refuge, perfect for brief sulks or sudden alarms. We could lie in ambush there, at peace with our grievances, until life took a turn for the better and lured us back into the active world.

But when the hour was tragic and we felt the need for a more remote hiding place, we took our troubles, with a recurring thrill, to the enchanted place our elders contemptuously called the "mouse cupboard." This was a low cupboard running the full length of the big attic beneath the sloping roof. Here, the aggrieved spirit of childhood could find solitude and darkness in which to plot revenge and acts of great magnanimity in turn. Luckily, our shelter appealed neither to the grown-ups' practical minds nor to those members of the younger generation who were beginning to worry about their clothes. You had to enter on your hands and knees; it was dusty, and the mice stubbornly disputed our claim to it. On the inner walls, the plaster seemed to ooze between the rough laths, and through little cracks and crevices in the roof tiles we could see the sky. But our imaginations soon transformed these minor defects. As a cave, the mouse cupboard had a very interesting history. As soon as the smugglers had left, it passed in turn through the hands of Aladdin, Robinson Crusoe, Ben Gunn, and Tom Sawyer, and

satisfied them all. No doubt it would have had many other tenants if someone had not discovered that it resembled a ship's cabin. From that moment, its place in our world was secure.

Sooner or later, our dreams always returned to the sea—not, it must be said, the polite, civilized sea of summer vacations, but the sea on whose foam magic casements open, and beside whose crimson tide the ships of Captain Avery and Captain Bartholomew Roberts keep faithful rendezvous with the Flying Dutchman. No very seaworthy vessel was needed to carry our hearts to those enchanted waters; a paper boat floating in a saucer was quite enough if the wind was favorable—so the fact that our cabin lacked portholes and had an unusual shape did not bother us. We could hear the water bubbling against the ship's side in a nearby cistern, and often the wind moaned and whistled overhead. We had our lockers, sleeping berths, and cabin table, and at one end of the cabin hung a rusty old cutlass full of notches. We would have hated anyone who tried to ruin our illusion that the notches had been made in battle. When we were stowaways, even the mice served a purpose: we gave them a full roving commission as savage rats and trembled when we heard them scurrying among the cargo.

But although we cut the figure of an old admiral out of a Christmas annual, and happily chased slave ships with Kingston for a while, the vessel did not truly come into her own until we became pirates and hoisted the "Jolly Roger" off the coast of Malabar. Then, by the light of flickering candles, the mice witnessed strange sights. If any of us had money, we would carouse wildly, drinking ginger beer like water, then drinking water from the ginger beer bottles, which still held a faint magic. We ate jam without bread aboard the Black Margaret, and when we came upon a merchant ship carrying a valuable cargo of dried apple rings—tough fare, but interesting—and the delicious sugar from candied peel, there were boisterous times in her dim cabin. We sang what we imagined were sea shanties in mournful voices and prepared our boarding pikes for the next adventure, though we had no clear idea what they really were.

And when we grew tired of draining rum kegs and counting pieces of eight, life at sea had quieter, but no less enjoyable, hours. It was pleasant to lie still after the fever of battle and watch the flickering candles with sleepy eyes. Surely no one has said the last word on the charm of candlelight; we liked little candles —stubby sixteens, perhaps—and as we lay there they spread their attendant shadows around us. Beneath us the water chuckled restlessly, and sometimes we heard the watch's footsteps overhead on deck, and now and then the clang of the great bell. At such an hour it was not hard to picture the luminous tropical seas through which the Black Margaret was making her way. Skies ablaze with stars, desert islands like baskets of glowing flowers, and a thousand wonders of the enchanted ocean—we saw them all.

It was strange to leave that place of shadows, silences, and hour-long dreams to play a humble part in a noisy, gaslit world that knew nothing of these wonders; but there were consolations. Older brothers might win arguments by methods that seemed unfair, but beneath a baffled exterior we could hide a profound pity for their unadventurous lives. Governesses might criticize our dusty clothes at wearisome length, but remembering that women were not allowed aboard the Black Margaret helped us remain conventionally polite. Like the gentleman in Mr. Wells's story, we knew there were better dreams, and that knowledge lifted us for a while above the petty passions of our surroundings.

We were not the only children who had found the mouse cupboard enchanting, for when we first explored it, we discovered a handful of wooden beads carefully hidden in a crevice in the wall. They seemed to belong to the nursery rather than the schoolroom, and yet perhaps those forgotten children had known what we knew, and our songs of the sea stirred only familiar echoes. It is quite possible that today other children have inherited our dreams, and that other hands steer the Black Margaret under approving stars. If so, they owe us a debt, for in one of our hiding places we left The Count of Monte Cristo in

English, a rare treasure for any proper boy. If this should ever reach his eyes, he will understand.

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