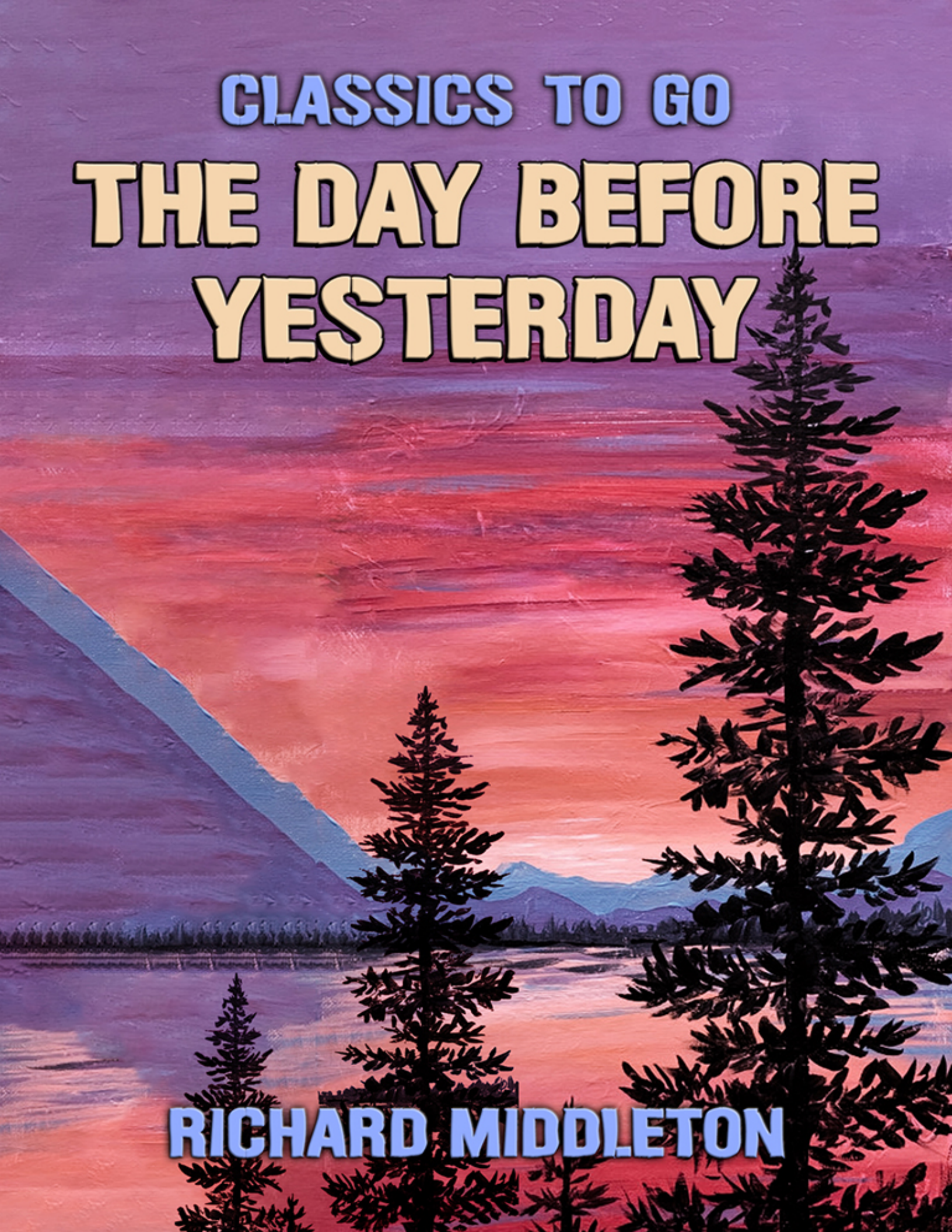
CLASSICS TO GO
THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY
RICHARD MIDDLETON

The Day Before Yesterday

Richard Middleton

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AN ENCHANTED PLACE

When elder brothers insisted on their rights with undue harshness, or when the grown-up people descended from Olympus with a tiresome tale of broken furniture and torn clothes, the groundlings of the schoolroom went into retreat. In summer-time this was an easy matter; once fairly escaped into the garden, any climbable tree or shady shrub provided us with a hermitage. There was a hollow tree-stump full of exciting insects and pleasant earthy smells that never failed us, or, for wet days, the tool-shed, with its armoury of weapons with which, in imagination, we would repel the attacks of hostile forces. But in the game that was our childhood, the garden was out of bounds in winter-time, and we had to seek other lairs. Behind the schoolroom piano there was a three-cornered refuge that served very well for momentary sulks or sudden alarms. It was possible to lie in ambush there, at peace with our grievances, until life took a turn for the better and tempted us forth again into the active world.

But when the hour was tragic and we felt the need for a hiding-place more remote, we took our troubles, not without a recurring thrill, to that enchanted place which our elders contemptuously called the “mouse-cupboard.” This was a low cupboard that ran the whole length of the big attic under the slope of the roof, and here the aggrieved spirit of childhood could find solitude and darkness in which to scheme deeds of revenge and actions of a wonderful magnanimity turn by turn. Luckily our shelter did not appeal to the utilitarian minds of the grown-up folk or to those members of the younger generation who were beginning to trouble about their clothes. You had to enter it

on your hands and knees; it was dusty, and the mice obstinately disputed our possession. On the inner walls the plaster seemed to be oozing between the rough laths, and through little chinks and crannies in the tiles overhead our eyes could see the sky. But our imaginations soon altered these trivial blemishes. As a cave the mouse-cupboard had a very interesting history. As soon as the smugglers had left it, it passed successively through the hands of Aladdin, Robinson Crusoe, Ben Gunn, and Tom Sawyer, and gave satisfaction to them all, and it would no doubt have had many other tenants if some one had not discovered that it was like the cabin of a ship. From that hour its position in our world was assured.

For sooner or later our dreams always returned to the sea—not, be it said, to the polite and civilised sea of the summer holidays, but to that sea on whose foam there open magic casements, and by whose crimson tide the ships of Captain Avery and Captain Bartholomew Roberts keep faithful tryst with the *Flying Dutchman*. It needed no very solid vessel to carry our hearts to those enchanted waters—a paper boat floating in a saucer served well enough if the wind was propitious—so the fact that our cabin lacked portholes and was of an unusual shape did not trouble us. We could hear the water bubbling against the ship's side in a neighbouring cistern, and often enough the wind moaned and whistled overhead. We had our lockers, our sleeping-berths, and our cabin-table, and at one end of the cabin was hung a rusty old cutlass full of notches; we would have hated any one who had sought to disturb our illusion that these notches had been made in battle. When we were stowaways even the mice were of service to us, for we gave them a full roving commission as savage rats, and trembled when we heard them scampering among the cargo.

But though we cut the figure of an old admiral out of a Christmas number, and chased slavers with Kingston very happily for a while, the vessel did not really come into her own until we turned pirates and hoisted the “Jolly Roger” off the coast of Malabar. Then, by the light of guttering candles, the mice witnessed some strange sights. If any of us had any money we would carouse terribly, drinking ginger-beer like water, and afterwards water out of the ginger-beer bottles, which still retained a faint magic. Jam has been eaten without bread on board the *Black Margaret*, and when we fell across a merchantman laden with a valuable consignment of dried apple-rings—tough fare but interesting—and the savoury sugar out of candied peel, there were boisterous times in her dim cabin. We would sing what we imagined to be sea chanties in a doleful voice, and prepare our boarding-pikes for the next adventure, though we had no clear idea what they really were.

And when we grew weary of draining rum-kegs and counting the pieces of eight, our life at sea knew quieter though no less enjoyable hours. It was pleasant to lie still after the fever of battle and watch the flickering candles with drowsy eyes. Surely the last word has not been said on the charm of candle-light; we liked little candles—dumpy sixteens they were perhaps—and as we lay they would spread among us their attendant shadows. Beneath us the water chuckled restlessly, and sometimes we heard the feet of the watch on deck overhead, and now and again the clanging of the great bell. In such an hour it was not difficult to picture the luminous tropic seas through which the *Black Margaret* was making her way. The skies of irradiant stars, the desert islands like baskets of glowing flowers, and the thousand marvels of the enchanted ocean—we saw them one and all.

It was strange to leave this place of shadows and silences and hour-long dreams to play a humble part in a noisy, gas-

lit world that had not known these wonders; but there were consolations. Elder brothers might prevail in argument by methods that seemed unfair, but, beneath a baffled exterior, we could conceal a sublime pity for their unadventurous lives. Governesses might criticise our dusty clothes with wearisome eloquence, but the recollection that women were not allowed on board the *Black Margaret* helped us to remain conventionally polite. Like the gentleman in Mr. Wells's story, we knew that there were better dreams, and the knowledge raised us for a while above the trivial passions of our environment.

We were not the only children who had found the mouse-cupboard a place of enchantment, for when we explored it first we discovered a handful of wooden beads carefully hidden in a cranny in the wall. These breathed of the nursery rather than of 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 likely enough that to-day other children have inherited our dreams, and that other hands steer the *Black Margaret* under approving stars. If this indeed be so, they are in our debt, for in one of our hiding-places we left the "Count of Monte Cristo" in English, rare treasure-trove for any proper boy. If this should ever meet his eyes he will understand.

A RAILWAY JOURNEY

I SUPPOSE that when little boys made their journeys by coach with David Copperfield or Tom Brown and his pea-shooting comrades they did in truth find adventure easier to achieve than we who were born in an age of railways. But though the rarer joys of far travel by road were denied us, it did not need Mr. Rudyard Kipling in a didactic mood to convince us that there was plenty of romance in railway journeys if you approached them in the right spirit. We were as fond of playing at trains as most small boys, and a stationary engine with the light of the furnace glowing on the grim face of the driver was a disquieting feature of all my nightmares. So when the grown-up people announced that one of us was to make a long journey young Ulysses became for the moment an envied and enchanted figure. Our periodical excursions to London were well enough in their way; noisy, jolly parties in reserved carriages to pantomimes and the Lord Mayor's Show, or matter-of-fact visits to the dentist or the shops. But we all knew the features of the landscape on the way to London by heart, and it was the thought of voyaging through the unknown that fired our lively blood, our hazy sense of geography enabling us to believe that all manner of marvels were to be seen by young eyes from English railway-carriages. Also we did not feel that we were real travellers until we had left all our own grown-ups behind, though in such circumstances we had to put up with the indignity of being confided to the care of the guard. Until children have votes they will continue to suffer from such slights as this!

One morning in early spring I left London for the north. The adult who saw me off performed his task on the whole very

well. True, he introduced me to the guard, a bearded and sinister man; but, on the other hand, he realised the importance of my having a corner seat, and only once or twice committed the error of treating me as if I were a parcel. For my part, I was at pains to conceal my excitement beneath the mannerisms of an experienced traveller. I put the window up and down several times and read aloud all the notices concerning luncheon-baskets and danger-signals. Then my companion shook hands with me in a sensible, manly fashion, and the train started. I sat back and examined my fellow-travellers, and found them rather disappointing. There were three ladies, manifestly of the aunt kind, and a stiff, well-behaved little girl who might have stepped out of one of my sister's story-books. She was reading a book without pictures, and when I turned over the pages of my magazines she displayed no interest in them whatever. I could never read in the train, so, with a tentative effort at good manners, I pushed them towards her, but she shook her head; to show her that I did not think this was a snub I pulled out my packet of sandwiches and had my lunch. After that I played with the blind, which worked with a spring, until one of the aunts told me not to fidget, although she was no aunt of mine. Then I looked out of the window, a prey to voiceless wrath.

By now we had left London far behind, and when I had finished composing imaginary retorts to the unscrupulous aunt I was quite content to see the wonders of the world flit by. There were hills and valleys decked with romantic woods and set with fascinating and secretive ponds. To my eyes the hills were mountains and the valleys perilous hollows, the accustomed lairs of tremendous dragons. I saw little thatched houses wherein swart witches awaited the coming of Hansel and Gretel, and fairy children waved to me from cottage gardens and the gates of level-crossings, greetings which I dutifully returned until the aunt made me

pull up the window. After a while a change came over the scenery. The placid greens and browns of the countryside blossomed to gold and purple and crimson. I saw a roc float across the arching sky on sluggish wings, and my eyes were delighted with visions of deserts and mosques and palm-trees. That my fellow-passengers would not raise their heads to behold these marvels did not trouble me; I beat on the window with delight, until, like little Billee in Thackeray's ballad, I saw Jerusalem and Madagascar and North and South Amerikee.

Then something surprising happened. I saw the earth leap up and invade the sky and the sky drop down and blot out the earth, and I felt as though my wings were broken. Then the sides of the carriage closed in and squeezed out the door like a pip out of an orange, until there was only a three-cornered gap left. The air was full of dust, and I sneezed again and again, but could not find my pocket-handkerchief. Presently a young man came and lifted me out through the hole, and seemed very surprised that I was not hurt. I realised that there had been an accident, for the train was broken into pieces and the permanent way was very untidy. Close at hand I saw the little girl sitting on a bank, and a man kneeling at her feet taking her boots off. I would have liked to speak to her, but I remembered how she had refused the offer of my magazines, and was afraid she would snub me again. The place was very noisy, for people were calling out, and there was a great sound of steam. I noticed that everybody's face was very white, especially the guard's, which made his beard seem as black as soot. The young man took me by the hand and led me along the uneven ground, and there was so much to see that my feet kept stumbling over things, and he had to hold me up. On the way we passed the body of a man lying with a rug over his head. I knew that he was dead; but I had seen drunken men in the streets lie like that, and I could not help looking

about for the policeman. Soon we came to a little station, and the platform was crowded with people who would not stand still, but walked round and round making noises. When I climbed up on the platform a woman caught hold of me and cried over me. One of her tears fell on my ear and tickled me; but she held me so tightly that I could not put up my hand to rub it. Her breath was hot on my head.

Then I heard a detested voice say, “Poor little boy, so tired!” and I shuddered back into consciousness of the world that was least interesting of all the worlds I knew. I need not have opened my eyes to be sure that the aunts were at their fell work again, and that the little girl’s snub nose was tilted to a patronising angle. Had I awakened a minute later she, too, would have joined in the auntish chorus of compassion for my weakness. As it was, I looked at her with drowsy pity, finding that she was one of those luckless infants who might as well stay at home for all the fun they get out of travelling. She knew no better than to scream when the train ran into a tunnel; what would she have done if she had seen my roc?

The train ran on and on, and still I throned it in my corner, awake or dreaming, indisputably master of all the things that counted. The three aunts faded into antimacassars; the little girl endured her uninteresting life and became an aunt and an antimacassar in her turn, and still I swung my legs in my corner seat, a boy-errant in the strange places of the world. I do not remember the name of the station at which the bearded guard ultimately brought me out of my dreams. I do remember standing stiffly on the platform and deciding that I had been travelling night and day for three hundred years. When I communicated this fact to the relatives who met me they were strangely unimpressed; but I knew that when I returned home to my brothers they would display a decent interest in the story of my

wanderings. After all, you can’t expect grown-up people to understand everything!

THE MAGIC POOL

Being born in a sceptical age, heirs of a world that certainly took its Darwin too seriously, we children did not readily enlarge the circle of our supernatural acquaintances. There was the old witch who lived in the two-storied house beyond the hill, in whom less discriminate eyes recognised only the very respectable widow of an officer in the India Army. There was the ghost of the murdered shepherd-lad that haunted the ruined hut high up on the windy downs; on gusty nights we heard him piping shrilly to his phantom flocks, and sometimes their little bells seemed to greet us from the chorus of the storm. There was a little drowned kitten who mewed to us from the shadows of the rain-water cistern, and a small boy who cried about the garden in the autumn because he could not find his ball among the dead leaves. We had all heard the three last, and most of us had seen them at twilight-time, when ghosts pluck up their poor thin courage and take their walks abroad. As for the witch, we relied on our intuitions and gave her house a wide berth.

The credentials of these four unquiet spirits having been examined and found satisfactory, schoolroom opinion was against any addition to their number. We would not accept my younger brother's murderer carrying a sack or my little sister's procession of special tortoises, though we acknowledged that there was merit in them, regarded merely as artistic conceptions. Perhaps, subconsciously, we realised that to make the supernatural commonplace is also to make it ineffective, and that there is no dignity in a life jostled by spooks. At all events, we relied for our periodical panics on those which had received the official sanction,