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An Enchanted Place (Chapter 2)*

[Richard Barham Middleton, 1882 – 1911]

“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 toolshed, with its armory 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 someone 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 civilized 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 neighboring 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 anyone 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 criticize 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.” ❀

*Middleton, R. B. (1912). *The Day Before Yesterday*. London: T. Fisher

