

The Afterthought

Marjorie Pickthall

Illustrated by

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The Afterthought

By Marjorie L. C. Pickthall

ILLUSTRATED BY G. W. L. BLADEN

A Story of a Boy's Adventure and a Man's Discovery

The Mother's voice followed them down the trail. "And if you see my Afterthought round the shingle-mill, send him home."

The big Quincey twins answered simultaneously, as they often did. Only one roared,

"He's at the store, Sweetest," and the other, "He's round the orchard, Honey-Mum." Then they looked at each other doubtfully.

"Well," said Rod, wearily, "how about it this time?"

"I told him to get me some stamps at the store," explained Ned.

"And I told him he wasn't to dare quit the orchard."

"Of course, I didn't know you'd said. . . ."

"Nor did I." Rod's handsome face was harassed. "If he's gone to the store, I ought to hit him for it."

"And I ought to hit him if he hasn't gone."

“Which ever it is——”

“Don’t you worry,” said Ned darkly, “it won’t be! That kid will have fixed it all right! He’ll have fixed it by ignoring both of us and going to the shingle-mill.”

They looked at each other uneasily. Rod said, “What will we do?”

“On second thoughts—I guess we’d better not do anything.”

They strode on together. Presently Rod remarked with bitterness, “That kid was just born to break up the family.”

“Mother must have been mad,” assented Ned gloomily.

They walked in silence down the pleasant forest-scented trail until the high drone of a power saw whined through the trees, and they came out in the clearing where the little mill stood. There was no need to ask if the Afterthought was here.

On the edge of the clearing stood a section of an old and tottering flume, dating from the days when bigger lumber than shingle-bolts had been supplied by that part of the country. The flume had long been dry. But as the twins looked they saw a small figure starting from the higher end, toboggan down it on a shingle with a velocity suggesting grease, hurtle from the lower end, which was some eight feet above the ground, and subside in a heap of rotted sawdust and dead boughs.

They ran in grim silence, and plucked the Afterthought from the old dump. He appeared to be unhurt, though his nose had suffered. They set him on his feet and began to brush him clean.

He was a small, plain child, with those wise, tender, faithful brown eyes one sees in a cocker spaniel. He now stood looking softly at his brothers over a large gray handkerchief which he held to his nose.

“What are you doing?” demanded Rod sternly.

“Can’t you see?” asked the Afterthought. “Bleedin’.” He surveyed the handkerchief, and added in a satisfied tone, “*Pints*. . .”

“Well, Mother wants you. You’re to go home right away.”

“Where are you fellers goin’?” asked the Afterthought gently.

“Over to the Inlet. . . You can’t come. Mother wants you.”

Said the Afterthought complacently, “It never hurts a woman to be kep’ waitin’ for you.”

“Well,” breathed the scandalized Rod, “*this* woman is not to be kept waiting. You go home this minute, George.”

The Afterthought, from a safe distance, lifted dog-like eyes of faith and pleading. “I’d sooner go with you, brother.”

“Well, you can’t.”



“It’s pretty lonely for me with no brothers of my own age.”

“It’s—it’s pretty lonely for me with no brothers of my own age. I—I guess I’d be a better boy if you took me around with you more.”

“You—go—home.”

“I’ll bet you’re not going to the cabin,” said George clearly. “You’re goin’ to see Miss Hallett.”

The twins, avoiding each other’s eyes, stood as if they’d been stung. Their faces were queer, as if the child’s words had uncovered some strange unhappy thing they feared. And the Afterthought wondered if he’d gone too far. “Anyway,” he declared hastily, “if it’s Miss Hallett, I won’t come, thanks.”

“You—don’t approve of her?” inquired Rod rather strangely.

The Afterthought, teetering on wide-stretched toes as if he wore high heels, and slapping an imaginary boot with an imaginary quirt, drawled

slowly. “She’s sure a good-looker, but I wouldn’t go to the trouble of branding her with a Double O. She’s a quitter. She’s the kind that’ll hawg the range all summer and lay down on you first time you rope a dogie. She _____”



*Rod said gently, “How far back was it that you quit?”
And, as he spoke, he just touched his hand on Ned’s
shoulder.*

The phrases that followed, though inoffensive, were of such unparalleled technical pungency that Rod’s hand met Ned’s in one impassioned clap across the Afterthought’s mouth. Rod said quietly, “That’ll do, George. Now you go.”

The Afterthought went swiftly.

He went with the more willingness in that he knew his brothers would not see Miss Hallett round the little hotel which they would pass, going to the Inlet. She was spending the day at the house of some friends, back near the store. He trotted back along the trail contentedly. Once he looked behind him. His brothers were walking heavily, heads bent, broad shoulders uneasily hunched, the width of the trail between them. As he looked, they suddenly stopped, and swung to face each other. They stood very still. The Afterthought hesitated a minute, then went resolutely on, and a turning hid them. He was breathing heavily; now and then he paused and spat accurately at a stump.

“Our family,” he meditated aloud after one of these interludes, “has run with some queer bunches. But quitters and Quinceys, though they start the same, don’t end together. I got to get busy or there’ll be trouble. I can’t have the family broken up for *her*.”

An hour later, Miss Doris Hallett, sitting and swinging luxuriously in a chair on the porch of her friend’s house, was aware of a small and homely boy who stood at the foot of the steps, watching her unwinkingly. She smiled at him from under lazy eyelids, and the sun gleamed in her bronze hair. Beautiful eyes, beautiful hair, a beautiful figure, yet not a beautiful woman. But she could not be in any town a week without every man knowing it, or walk down a street without every man being aware of her.

“Hello!” said the little boy. “There’s a dead Indian in the woods.”

“Is there?” Miss Hallett smiled again, recognizing him for little Georgie Quincey. “Then I suppose he’s a good Indian. How long has he been there, Georgie?”

“Oh, twenty years, I guess,” said the Afterthought reluctantly. He eyed her with hope, but Miss Hallett did not respond. He guessed the Indian was too dead. . . He said, “Henry Peters has his thigh-bone.”

“Oh?”

Miss Hallett still sounded lazy. The Afterthought came up one step. His soft eyes were lambent, eager lamps. He said guardedly, “Yes. He has it in the chicken house. He uses it to pound sharps. I could show it to you if you like.”

“Oh, I don’t think I want to see a bone.”

There was no accounting for women, Georgie concluded. He came up another step. He said, "My brothers have gone to see if the cabin on the Inlet wants a new roof."

"Have they, Georgie?"

"Yes, they wouldn't take me."

"Too bad," she yawned.

"Oh, I dunno. I guess they wanted to be alone. You see, I think they were going to fight."

"To *fight*?" She sat up suddenly, a queer glow in her eyes.

"They'd pretty near started at it when I left them."

"*Fighting*?" The girl's breath came short, there was a strange little greedy twitch of her red lips. She said in a careless voice, "I thought they were such a model pair of brothers. What were they going to fight about?"

"I dunno." The Afterthought regarded her wistfully. "It makes me feel bad. But I dunno. Do *you*?"

"I—could guess, perhaps," answered Doris Hallett with a strange excited little laugh. "I could—guess. . ."

Georgie Quincey did not seem to hear. He was gazing pathetically into the forest. "It makes me feel bad," he repeated. "They may be at it right now. Or they may have quit, and one of 'em may be layin' there in the cabin, all bloody. *Quarts*," he added with brief ecstasy, "all over the place. . . I wish I dare go and see."

There was a silence, in which came no sound but the sound of Doris Hallett's fingers, beating on the arms of her chair. Then she said, in the same, queer, excited little voice, "Is it very far to the cabin?"

"It's a good way by the trail. But there's a short cut through the woods."

Silence again, and the beating of two hearts. Then, with a fierce movement, the girl stood up.

"Let's go," she said, "and see!"

"Oh, Miss Hallett," answered the rider of the flume, "I'd be scared. I wouldn't dare!"

She stood up royally, laughing, bright-eyed; not averse even to the awe in this child's eyes. She moved down the steps splendidly enough, then

turned. "Come," she said, "come and show me the way! *I dare!*"

"*Roped, by the Great Brass Spurs!*" said the Afterthought to himself; and took her hand shyly, and led her into the forest.

After an hour, a certain dubiousness began to show like a shadow in the flame of her vanity. She said, "Are you sure this is the way?"

"The Inlet's over there, Miss Hallett." Georgie's arm described a generous sweep.

"It's a very rough trail."

It was not a trail. It was a deer path. The Afterthought was silent, glancing anxiously at the sun. It was certainly lower. They climbed on without speaking; to himself the Afterthought was saying, "When'll be the right time to do it?" Miss Hallett was saying to herself, "Two brothers, fighting—for *me!*" The words were rich and heady in her mouth as wine.

She never noticed when the deer path died out. She never noticed when Georgie turned from its direction and led her up a long hillside. A light fire must once have cleared the ground of small stuff, leaving the great timber untouched; for they moved without much difficulty through fern and salalberry; while two hundred feet overhead the evergreen branches roofed them from the sky. Later, much later, they gained the crest of the range. And there Miss Hallett cried out in keen alarm.

"Why!" she said. "The sun's setting!"

It was. It was almost down. Level gold lances cleared the opposite range. Miss Hallett's face took on a curious hard look. All the fire died out of her. She looked round at the forest. Then she turned to the child. "What have you done?" she asked.

"I guess I've got a little lost," confessed the Afterthought. "I guess we better not go on to the cabin."

"Go on?" cried Doris Hallett unsteadily. She stared again at the silent trees. They seemed to close round her implacably, which ever way she looked; trees, silent, huge, impenetrable; merciless, and each moment, to her fancy, darker. She shook a little under the strange chill of her nerves, the old panic of forest places, Pan's terror. Suddenly she caught the Afterthought by his thin shoulders and gave him a little hard shake. "Go on?" she said unsteadily. "I—I wouldn't go on for the world. Find the way home. We must get home before it's dark. Before it's *dark*, do you hear?"

“Yes, Miss Hallett,” said Georgie dutifully.

They turned and hurried down the side of the hill. The ground seemed to have become inexplicably rougher since they went up. Miss Hallett suffered in transit. Again and again Georgie said confidently, “*There’s* the path we came by, Miss Hallett!” But it never was. And each time Georgie murmured timidly, “I guess I’m still a little lost, Miss Hallett.”

The sky was bright; but the trees seemed each to be the nucleus of a store of winged shadows, bodiless darknesses. Miss Hallett was hurrying blindly. She had, it was obvious, no sense of direction. She would go on thus until she dropped, the human mind in her utterly overwhelmed by the spirit of the trees. There was something a little dreadful in this senseless concentration on haste. For an instant, the Afterthought was dismayed. Then he set his teeth. It was time, he concluded, to finish his design.

He lingered behind Miss Hallett on the descent. When she was almost out of sight he set his left toe behind his right heel, in the manner known to every low-class comedian, and tripped himself artistically. As he fell he gave a cry.

The youth of our age owes much to the cinematograph. Georgie was aware that the picture he presented, cast helpless among the ferns, lacked little of pathos. But he was vaguely disturbed. Something had gone wrong. He felt shaken. That fall had not turned out just what he expected.

“Oh! Miss Hallett!” cried Georgie pitifully into the shadows. “Oh! Miss Hallett!”

He lay quite still while she returned to him. She came in little irregular bursts and starts of speed. As she leaned over him he could see that her face was quite hard and white, and that her hair was untidy and her sleeve torn. She said with a curious impatience, “What is it? What have you done now?”

“I’m afraid I’ve hurt my leg, Miss Hallett.”

“Which one?”

Georgie decided rapidly which one was to be hurt, and said, “The right one.”

“Can you stand on it?”

“I will try,” said Georgie patiently, “if you will help me up.”

She set her hands under his arms and lifted him. She held him so a moment, without gentleness. “Now,” she said quickly, “try. See if you can

walk.”

Georgie calculated with lightning rapidity, which was his right foot, and lowered it gingerly. He gasped. An expression of amazement, outrage, and pain held his small face rigid. Miss Hallett removed her hands.

“*Oh!*” yelled Georgie, in a shaking voice. “The blame thing’s really bust, by heck!” and he slipped down in a small heap at Miss Hallett’s feet.

It is to be supposed that he fainted. He knew nothing more until he found himself resting on the slope, propped against a log. Miss Hallett was standing in front of him. And it was nearly dark. Yes, the Afterthought concluded, with an unexpected twinge, it was nearly *quite* dark. . .

“M-M-Miss H-H-Hallett,” whispered the Afterthought.

She was moving up and down in front of the log with the jerky restlessness of latent hysteria. She said sharply, “Well, what are we to do now?”

“I g-g-guess we better wait till someone comes to look for us.”

“Wait here? In the forest? In the *dark*? . . . I couldn’t. . .” He could hear the sharp sound of her indrawn breath. “I—I’d go *mad* with fear. . .”

Georgie, you see, had let himself in for a good deal. A sight of the naked, black, primitive terror that hides in civilized souls like a criminal in a town is never a pleasant sight. He shivered as he watched and listened to the woman who paced up and down in front of the log; he paid for all his sins. And it grew quite dark.

Later she said, “Not to know where we are. . . it’s horrible, horrible. . .” He could hear the beating of her hands. He looked up at the darkness overhead, which was the forest, the great ceiling of the boughs; and in it he saw, leading from where he lay, a narrow lane of stars. . .

“Miss Hallett,” said Georgie in a grave voice like a man’s, “we’re right at the head of the path. The path’s *there*.”

“The path. . .?”

“Yes, Miss Hallett. We’re not lost.”

“Oh, my God,” whispered the woman. And Georgie shut his eyes. She was suddenly very still. Her eyes, too, had found that narrow channel of stars. Under it was the path. At the end of the path were houses, faces, voices, and above all, light, light! She took a little run towards it.

“Miss Hallett,” said Georgie gently.

She moved slowly back to the log. Presently she said in a strange dead-level voice, “But there’s the boy. I can’t carry him in the dark. And I can’t leave him.”

She was not addressing the Afterthought, who lay quite motionless, his arm covering his eyes, as if he were ashamed. She sat down on the end of the logs.

“I can’t leave him. . .”

“*When,*” wondered a small detached voice in Georgie’s mind, “*is she going to quit?*”

“I can’t leave him.”

The forest was dark, immeasurably still, roofing them from all but that little ribbon of stars.

“I mustn’t leave him. . .”

That was all the Afterthought heard, that dry, monotonous whispering repetition. Later, he did not hear even that. More knowledge, unfit for little boys, came to him; he knew what it was to feel forsaken.

But not for very long. For at the coming of the dark, an anxious Mother had sought out a strange, grim, and tight-lipped Ned, who was holding one hand surreptitiously in a pail of water in the back kitchen. And in a minute that changed Ned had come upon an equally altered Rod, with troubled eyes, who was trying, with the aid of a flashlight and a mirror behind the woodpile, to comb his hair so it would hide a cut over his eye.

Two hours back, that implacable alien Ned had sworn never to speak to his brother again. Yet now he said, “That kid’s lost!”

“Our Afterthought?”

“Yes. And she. . . Miss Hallett, too. They were seen this afternoon, going up the deer track to Baldhead. Come on.”

“Wait till I get the lantern,” said Rod quietly, and came.

That deer track had taken Miss Hallett and the Afterthought some time to travel. The two big Quinceys had not been following it an hour when a woman beat into the circle of lantern-light that travelled with them, like a moth.

Doris Hallett had never looked so beautiful as when she broke suddenly from the dark and the silence that had betrayed her; for now her lovely soulless coloring had a spirit, even if it was only the spirit of fear. Her bright hair was loose, her pale fine silks torn to whispering ribbons. Ned was in the lead. She fluttered to him and clung. His arm went round her, he stood very still, looking down at the fair head on his shoulder. For one immeasurable and perfect instant the forest seemed to hold a perfect thing.

Presently Rod said quietly, "Here's one of 'em, anyway. The other can't be far off."

The girl's eyes were fixed on the lantern in Rod's hand. Wide, shallow eyes, drugged with fear. "Oh!" she breathed. "The light. . . I was *afraid*. . ."

Ned's voice was deep, with a little quiver in it, when he said, "You're all right. You've had a bad scare, I'm afraid. It's not safe for strangers alone to go off the trails. . ."

She said blankly, "But I wasn't alone——"

There was an odd little stillness. She and Ned had been close together. Now, something born of the forest, the merciless revealing forest, slipped between them. And Rod said, "Then where *is* Georgie?"

In some fibre of her soul, never awakened before, she was aware of something new in the faces, in the voices, of the two men she had played with for a summer's amusement. She could not speak. She pointed back along the trail. And suddenly, she knew that she would have got off cheaply if she could have given a year of her life in exchange for the necessity of that gesture.

But those simple young woodsmen who had fought for her sake were still silent. And words were forced from her at last, confusedly. "He fell, just when we'd found the track again. . . No, he's not hurt badly. I couldn't carry him in the dark. I—I didn't know what to do. I—I left him—to get help."

They said nothing. She repeated once more, eagerly, "To get help. . ."

She was strangely confused. The foundations of her self-esteem crumbled. She was shaking, burning with—yes, with shame.

She had left Georgie because she was afraid. The other was a lie, to which she suddenly clung as if it was the last rag of her clothing. And the men knew it was a lie.

Rod said gently, “How far back was it that you quit?” And as he spoke, he just touched his hand on Ned’s shoulder. And Ned, with a queer hurt breath, stepped back from Doris Hallett. Just one step, but he stepped a long way; right out of her life. Rod shoved the lantern into his hand, saying, “Go on. I’ll wait here with—her. . .”

Ned took the light and went without a word.

He went on a long way. The forest was very still, and that stillness was salve to a young heart suffering its first disillusionment. Once he stopped and laid his hand half-lovingly on the stone-gray bole of a fir, where in the lantern light the Spanish moss gleamed like veils of dew. “She was scared,” he muttered. “It was too big for her. She couldn’t measure up to it. She went off and quit a hurt kid. . . . Poor little thing. . .”

It was not the Afterthought he pitied.

Presently he said, “What in thunder’s *that*?”

He listened. Then he knew. It was the Afterthought, keeping his courage up with indomitable song.

It came to Ned’s ears, an odd reedy sound, drawled through innumerable silences.

“Sal Lou come down to the lil’ corral,
And she sez to me, sez she,
‘I guess fer you there’s another gal
And another feller fer me.
Fer I ain’t no use at a round-up dance
Nor cuddlin’ a bench in the park,
Fer the feller,’ she sez, ’as won’t take a chance
On kissin’ a gal in the d-d-d-dark.’”

The last word faltered. A dismayed grin drove from Ned’s face the grim yet pitiful look which had been there since he left Doris Hallett. “Whew!” he said. “Mother’d have a *fit* if she heard him singing ‘Sal Lou.’ I hope he don’t know the chorus!”

He pressed on, listening so anxiously he forgot to shout.

“Sal Lou, Sal Lou,
I’m far away from you——”

“Georgie!” yelled Ned anxiously. “You there? Hold on, I’m coming to you, kid. You all *right*?”

“Sure!” replied the Afterthought from the darkness. . . “——I’m far away from you, B-but I always k-keep your k-k-kind advice in m-mind _____”

“Georgie!” yelled Ned again. “Don’t you sing! Don’t! Shout, so’s I can hear where you are. . .”

When Ned reached the log against which the Afterthought sat, he was tactful enough not to turn the light on his small brother’s face. Nor did he make a single remark nor ask one question, which was unusual. He just said, “Mother’s waiting supper,” and gathered the Afterthought into his arms, hurt leg and all. And the Afterthought found it kind of nice to be carried that way. Big brothers had their uses after all.

Presently, when the Afterthought had stopped making a queer little sniffing sound of which Ned took no notice, he said gravely, “Say, Ned.”

“Well, youngster?”

“It was kind of Miss Hallett to go and fetch you, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” answered Ned, in the same careful, grave voice, “it was.” A little later, he said suddenly, “Say, Georgie, you’re white all through. You’re a gentleman. . .”

A little later yet, he whispered stealthily, “Say, Georgie. . .”

“Yes?”

“*Were you honest-to-goodness lost?*”

There was a long silence. Then the Afterthought coughed. “Things,” he said cautiously, “didn’t turn out just as I ’spected. But there’s some things one gentleman *never* asks another.” To himself he said drowsily, “Quitters and Quinceys, they start right, but they ain’t in the same finish. I wonder if he’s goin’ to take her out in the canoe to-morrow like he’d thought of, or if I k’n have it. . .”

Well, no, Ned Quincey didn’t take her out in the canoe, though he’d thought of it. But afterthoughts are sometimes best.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Afterthought* by Marjorie L. C. Pickthall]