

PRINCESS POLLY'S GAY WINTER

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CHAPTER I

MERRY TIMES PROMISED

Little Rose Atherton sat on the lower step of the three broad ones that led down from the piazza, and she wondered if there were, in all the world, a lovelier spot than Avondale.

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"And we live in the finest part of Avondale," she said, continuing her thoughts aloud. "Tho' wherever Uncle John is, seems better than anywhere else."

She had spent the bright, happy summer at the shore, and surely Uncle John's fine residence, "The Cliffs," had been a delightful summer home.

Then Uncle John had one morning told a bit of wonderful news.

"I've something to tell you, my little girl," he said, drawing Rose to him.

"This is our summer home," he continued, "and a fine summer place it is, but Rose, little girl, we're to spend the coming Winter at Avondale."

It had been very exciting!

Before closing "The Cliffs," those treasures that Uncle John held dearest were carefully packed to be sent to the new home, and then, in the big, luxurious car, they had motored to Avondale.

"Good-bye," Rose had said, as she looked back toward "The Cliffs," and then, after throwing a kiss toward the house, she nestled back in the car, and tried, for the twentieth time, to "guess" how the new home would look.

It had proved to be more grand, more beautiful than she had dreamed. "And so near sweet Princess Polly," she said, "just the next house but one."

She sprang from the low step, and ran down to the sidewalk to see if Princess Polly was yet in sight. "I think it is a little early," she said, "for Polly said she'd come over at nine, and it isn't nine yet."

The dainty Angora came down the walk to meet her, her tail like a great plume, her soft coat as fluffy as thistle down. Proudly she walked as if she knew her beauty.

"Oh, you darling puss!" cried Rose. "You make this new home seem just as if we'd always lived here."

"That's right, Miss Rose," said the housekeeper, as she looked from the window.

"A cat does make a place seem homelike. She's not stared about, nor acted wild as most cats do. She made herself at home, and seemed at home the first day the captain brought her to you. Do you remember, Miss Rose, she sprang from the basket, sat down on the rug, and began

to wash her face?"

"I know she did, and that proves that she's a wonderful cat. She couldn't act like a common cat. Could you, dear?"

The cat rubbed lovingly against Rose.

"We're going to choose a name for her to-day, and Princess Polly is coming over to help me. Oh, there she comes now!" Rose ran down the path to meet Polly, the white cat trotting along after her.

"I wanted to bring Sir Mortimer over to get acquainted with her, but he's just dear, in all but one thing. He isn't always polite to other cats, and sometimes he's really horrid, and growls so dreadfully that you'd think he hadn't any manners," said Polly.

"I guess it's just as well," Rose said, "for we'll be pretty busy choosing a name."

Polly had written a list of fine names, and together they read them, the white cat sitting and eagerly watching them for a time, and then playing on the lawn with a ball that was her own especial toy. At last after reading the list of imposing names again and again, they decided that, after all, Beauty best suited the lovely creature.

"To think that you are to live here at Avondale again!" Polly said, when at last the name had been chosen.

"Yes, and to think that there's only one house between yours and mine!" said Rose.

"You'll be happier in this handsome house with your Uncle John, than you ever were when you lived here at Avondale before at the little wee cottage with your Aunt Judith."

"Oh, yes," Rose said quickly, "because now I know that Aunt Judith loves me, but then, I thought she didn't. With Uncle John,—why every moment since I've lived at his house, I've known that he loved me."

A moment she sat thinking, then she spoke again.

"When I lived here at Avondale before, I lived all the time at the cottage, but now I'll live here, with dear Uncle John, and go down to see Aunt Judith, oh, sometimes."

Then she turned to look at her playmate.

"Polly, Dear Polly!" she cried. "You look more like a princess than when we first called you 'Princess Polly.' Now, who ever thinks of

calling you Polly Sherwood, your real, truly name?"

"Who cares which they call me, so long as they love me?" cried Polly with a merry laugh.

They were in the garden at the rear of the house, but between trees and shrubbery they could see a bit of the avenue.

Something moving attracted their attention.

"Look!" cried Rose. "What's that?" Polly did look.

Something like a huge wheel, all spokes and hub, but no tire, was whirling down the avenue.

"It's Gyp!" said Polly.

"What? That?" said Rose.

"Yes, that's Gyp, and he's going down the avenue whirling first on his hands, then on his feet," Polly said.

"Oh, I wish he wasn't in this town," cried Rose, "because no one ever can guess what horrid thing he'll do next. And he won't stay over by the woods where he lives. He keeps coming over to this part of Avondale, and I wonder someone doesn't stop him."

"Who could stop Gyp?" Polly asked.

And who, indeed, could stop him? He was one of a family that was more than half Gypsy, and Gyp was, surely, the wildest of the clan.

He would steal, yet so crafty was he that no one ever caught him. He was full of mischief, and nothing delighted him more than the assurance that he had really frightened someone.

As he usually felt very gay when he had done some especially annoying bit of mischief, it was safe to say that he had spent a busy morning somewhere, and now was turning handsprings to give vent to his hilarious feelings.

"Oh, what do you s'pose he's been doing?" Polly asked.

"I don't know," Rose said slowly, "but I remember that he always acted just like that when he'd been very naughty."

"Rob Lindsey said yesterday that somebody ought to watch Gyp, and whenever he seems to feel gay, just look around the neighborhood, and learn what he has been doing," said Rose.

"You'd have to watch him all the time, then," Polly replied, "for he always acts as if he felt full of fun, and mischief."

"Then whoever watched Gyp could do nothing else. He wouldn't have a minute for—oh look!" Rose sprang up on to a low ledge that the gardener had left showing because of its natural beauty. Flowers grew at its base, and the little rock, or ledge, rose just enough to show its crest above the blossoms. Something bright and fair was racing down the street, as if pursuing Gyp.

It shouted lustily. "You Gyp! You _mean_ old,—oh, I don't know what!"

"Why, that's Gwen Harcourt!" said Polly, "and she's chasing Gyp!"

Like a small whirlwind composed of muslin, lace, and ribbons, Gwen tore down the avenue, shouting, and screaming as she ran.

She had snatched a handful of gravel just as she started to chase him, and she hurled the small, round stones after his flying figure.

Not one of them hit him, and as he ran, he looked over his shoulder to grin like an imp, as he shouted:

"Oh, what a shot! Ye couldn't hit the side of the house!"

That so maddened Gwen, that she forgot to run, and in the middle of the street, stood stamping her foot, and shrieking.

Of course Gyp was delighted! If he had not frightened her, he had, at least, the joy of seeing how angry Gwen could be. He vaulted over a low wall, and carelessly whistling, went at high speed across the lawn, toward the river, crossed the bridge, and, as usual, hid in the forest beyond.

Gwen stood, where he had left her, watching him as he hurried away, and finally disappeared.

"Horrid thing!" she cried. "How I wish I knew of something I could do to plague him!"

Gwen was quickly angered, but her anger was never long-lived.

She turned toward home.

"_Let_ him run, if he wants to. Who cares? I don't."

Already she was humming a merry tune.

"I read a story yesterday 'bout a house that had a secret closet in it. 'Twas a fine story, and I guess I'll tell it to the first girl I

meet," she said.

It happened that Rose and Polly were walking down the avenue, on the way to Sherwood Hall, just as Gwen Harcourt gave up chasing Gyp.

"Hello!" she cried, "I wondered when you'd come to Avondale to live. How long have you been here?"

"Two weeks," said Rose.

"Why didn't you let me know? I'd have been over to see you long before this," Gwen replied.

Polly looked at Rose. She knew that Rose was not at all fond of Gwen, and wondered what reply she would make.

Rose did not have to answer, for Gwen continued:

"Sit down on this wall, and I'll tell you a story. I'll come over to your house some day this week, but now listen, while we sit here. It's a story I read yesterday, 'bout a house that had a secret closet, and ours has one, do you hear?" She leaned forward and pointed her finger, first at Polly, then at Rose.

"_Our_ house has a secret closet. Don't you both wish yours had?"

"Why, Gwen Harcourt! What could we do with secret closets?" said Rose.

"The girl in the story I read was locked into the closet by mistake, and she couldn't get out!" said Gwen, looking quite as excited as if she were telling something pleasant. Rose moved uneasily, and Polly shivered.

"Didn't they ever find her?" Polly asked.

"I guess not," said Gwen, "and the funny thing is that the story stopped right there, so you see I'll never have any idea whether she ever got out or not."

"Oh, I like pleasant stories," Rose said, as she slipped from the wall. In an instant Polly stood beside her, and the two turned toward home, but Gwen had no idea of losing her audience so soon.

"Wait a minute," she cried, "and I'll tell you 'bout the girl that fell into the ditch, and had to be pulled out by her hair!"

"Oh, don't!" cried Polly, and clapping her hands over her ears, she turned, and ran at top speed, followed by Rose.

They soon outran Gwen, and were glad to rest.

"Did you ever hear such _horrid_ stories?" Polly asked.

"Never!" cried Rose, "unless it was other stories that she told at other times. There's the one that she made us listen to when we were over to Lena Lindsey's one day. The one about the ghost that rode down the main street every night at twelve."

"Oh, I remember," said Polly. "That was the time that Rob Lindsey said the shivers ran up and down his spine until his back was all _humps_! He said the shivers had become _chronic_! We laughed at Rob, but even the funny things he said couldn't drive away the thoughts of the story that Gwen Harcourt had told."

The bright, sunny days sped as swiftly at Avondale, as they had at the shore.

Hints of pleasures that already were being planned for the coming Winter were floating as freely as if the wind carried them, and all over Avondale, wherever small girls and boys were at play, one might hear scraps of conversation that told of anticipated pleasures.

Some of the gossip reached Aunt Judith's cottage, and she resolved to do a bit of entertaining, if not on the grand scale in which her neighbors indulged, at least in a manner that her little friends would enjoy.

She laughed softly as she moved about the tiny rooms, and thought of the quaint, merry party that would at least be original.

"The cottage is small, and so it will have to be a little party, but we'll call it 'small and select,'" she said.

A light tap at the door, made her turn, and she hastened to open the screen door, that Rose might enter.

"The fine house, and fine friends don't make you forget your Aunt Judith, dear," she said.

"Oh, I'll never forget you," Rose said, "and I'll come to see you now I'm to live so near. To-day I'll sit beside you while you sew. I'll sit in the little chair that was always mine."

"It is yours now, dear, and, whenever you come, I'll 'play,' as you and Polly say, I'll 'play' that you are once more living here at the cottage."

There was news to be told. Uncle John was to have a fine conservatory built, and later it would be stocked with beautiful flowering plants.

Lena Lindsey was to give a fine party some time during the Winter, and Leslie Grafton, and her brother Harry had already hinted that there would be gaiety at their home.

Mrs. Sherwood always gave some sort of party for Princess Polly, and surely everyone remembered her beautiful party of the Winter before.

All these things she told Aunt Judith.

"And Uncle John says he will not permit his neighbors to do all the entertaining, and when he says that he laughs," said Rose.

Aunt Judith stopped rocking and sat very straight.

"And I shall entertain in a small way myself," she said.

"Oh, Aunt Judith!" cried Rose, her surprise making her eyes round, and bright.

"The wee party that I shall give will be in honor of my little niece, Rose."

Rose laid her warm hand on Aunt Judith's arm.

"How good you are," she said. "And I'll come over the day of the party, and help you get ready. I'll love to. 'Twill be half the fun. Oh, Aunt Judith, please tell me what the dear little party is to be like."

"Like a party that I once enjoyed when I was little," Aunt Judith said.

"I remember it as perfectly as if it had occurred yesterday. To repeat it now will be a quaint delight. I'll not tell you all about it yet, but when my plans are made, you shall come over here to the cottage, and I'll tell you every detail. I believe the tiny party will do me good. I shall feel once more like the little lass that I was when I received the invitation, and then a week later, dressed in my best, went to my friend's house. There were twelve guests, and I shall have just twelve at my party."

CHAPTER II

THE SEA NYMPH

Little Sprite Seaford sat in the first car of the long train, her eyes bright with excitement, a tear on her cheek, and her red lips quivering.

One little hand nervously clutched her handkerchief, while the other grasped the handles of her very new suitcase.

She had wound her pretty arms tightly around her mother's neck, kissed her, oh, so many times, and then, lest her courage fail her, had turned and fled from the house, where on the beach, she clung to her father's hand, and silently walked toward the station.

She felt that if she tried to talk she would surely cry, but why was the sturdy captain so silent? Did he feel, as his little daughter did, that safety lay in silence? Did he fear to speak lest the tears might come? It had been decided that Sprite should accept Mr. Sherwood's invitation, and spend the Winter at Avondale, enjoying the early Winter months at Sherwood Hall, and the latter part of the season as the guest of Uncle John Atherton and his little niece, Rose.

She had enjoyed the planning of her modest little wardrobe, she had talked of the delight of having Rose and Princess Polly for her playmates all Winter.

She had promised to be a faithful little pupil at school, and she had dreamed all night, and talked all day of the delightful Winter that she was to enjoy.

Now, seated in the car, ready to take her first journey from home, she looked about her with frightened eyes. Captain Seaford stood beside her. He had bought a box of candy, and a book, trusting that they might help to cheer her.

He looked down at the little daughter who was so dear to him.

"I'd make the trip with ye, Sprite, but yer ma, I'm thinking, will need me, 'bout the time she knows yer train has started," he said.

"Oh, she will. You must go back to her," cried Sprite.

The conductor entered and stated that all who were intending to leave the car must leave at once, or remain on board. Captain Seaford stooped to kiss the little upturned face.

"Oh, father, dear! If you and mother hadn't worked so hard to get me ready for the long visit, I'd give it up now. I'd rather go back with you."

"Tut, tut, Sprite! Be a brave lassie, and try to make the trip bravely. Ye need the good schooling and the merry playmates. The Winter at the shore is always dull. Cheer up, now. We're to have a letter, remember,

as soon as ye reach Avondale.”

”Ay, ay, sir!” he said, as the conductor beckoned, impatiently, and with another kiss, and a hasty ”Good-bye,” he left the car.

Sprite knew that he would stand on the platform, and she turned toward the window.

Through blinding tears, she saw his stalwart form, and she tried to smile, for his sake.

Before she could chase away the tears, the train had started, she saw through her tear-dimmed lashes a blurred landscape, and then,—why she was actually riding away from her seashore home! For a time she sat, as if in a dream, and then the conductor came along. Little Sprite looked up into his pleasant face, and wondered why he paused.

”Let me see your ticket, my dear,” he said, and she blushed at her forgetfulness, and drew it from her pocket.

He punched it, and then, in a gentle, fatherly way, he said:

”Your father, Captain Seaford, is a firm friend of mine. He asked me to look out for you, and see that you got off the train at Avondale. He said this was your first bit of travelling alone, but that your friends would be waiting for you when you arrived.”

”They will, oh, they will!” she eagerly cried, ”and thinking of that makes me feel happier. I’ve never been away alone before.”

”I’ve a little girl at home who is much braver to talk about going away from home, than she is when the time comes to start. But don’t worry, little Miss Seaford,” he said, with a laugh, ”for I’ll be your friend all the way to Avondale.”

”Oh, thank you,” she said, and he thought that he had never seen a lovelier face. She opened the new book, hoping that the story and the pictures might make her forget her homesickness. It was evident that she considered a good book a good friend.

The story held her attention, the picture charmed her, and the box of candy was an added comfort. She nestled close to the window, her long golden hair fell over her shoulders, and framed her face, and the old conductor smiled when he passed down the aisle, and looked at the dear little figure.

”The book has made her forget to worry,” he said, softly.

A little later, when he paused beside her seat, she looked up to smile at him.

"I keep right on reading," she said, "because if I stop to think, I remember that all the time I'm going farther away from home."

"Then whenever you look up from the page, just remember that you are getting nearer, and nearer to Avondale, where you can write your first letter home," he said in an effort to cheer her.

"Oh, yes," said Sprite, "and I'll do that before I go to sleep to-night, and post it early to-morrow morning." Then, for a long time, she read the fascinating story.

Just as she closed the book she realized that the train was slowing down.

The conductor was coming toward her. What was the brakeman saying?

"The next station will be Avondale!" he shouted, and little Sprite's heart beat faster.

The conductor stood at her seat now. "I'll take your suit case," he said. "Come with me."

How her little heart beat!

Would they be at the station? They had promised to be there when the train arrived.

She could not see from where she stood in the aisle.

Ah, now the train had actually stopped! She was out on the platform! She was going down the steps. The kindly conductor was saying something about wishing her a pleasant visit. The train was starting off.

Oh, was she utterly alone?

"Sprite! Oh, you've come!" cried a sweet, familiar voice, and Princess Polly caught both her hands.

"I was so afraid that something would happen, and you wouldn't come," she cried.

"And I was wondering what I'd do if I didn't see you when I left the car. Oh, wouldn't I have been frightened?" said Sprite, with a nervous little laugh.

"Oh, how could you think I'd miss coming to meet you? Mamma said the last moment, as I ran down the steps:

"I _do_ hope you will find Sprite at the station,' and I _did_," Polly said. "Now, come over to the carriage, and we'll fly to Sherwood Hall."

"This is my suit case, and, oh, there's my trunk," Sprite said.

"Oh, the coachman will take care of those. We'll get seated so as to reach home in just no time. I can't wait to take you to mamma."

The color brightened in Sprite's dimpled cheeks.

She was determined not to be homesick, and the ride along the fine streets, and then up the long avenue, showed such grand residences, such spacious piazzas, such velvet lawns and gorgeous masses of flowers, that the sea captain's little daughter began to wonder if she were in some new country, or at Avondale, where her new friends actually lived.

"Here we are!" cried Polly, as the horse slackened his pace at the broad gateway, "and this is Sherwood Hall, your new home for the Winter."

"For _part_ of the Winter!" called a merry voice, and Uncle John Atherton with Rose beside him in his big motor, laughed gaily as Sprite turned to learn who greeted her.

For a moment the carriage and the motor stood side by side, while the three small girls chatted gaily, then, believing that Mrs. Sherwood and Polly should greet their guest, uninterrupted by neighbor or friend, Uncle John bowled away down the avenue, they responded to Rose's waving handkerchief, and then rode up the driveway.

"Oh, what a lovely, _lovely_ house!" cried Sprite, "and what a dear place to live in. I _know_ I'm to be happy here!"

"Indeed you are!" cried Polly, "and here's mamma."

"Dear little girl," Mrs. Sherwood said, as Sprite stepped from the carriage, and ran up the steps. "I'm glad to see you, and I shall be glad indeed to keep you as long as Captain Atherton will permit. He was over here last evening, and he said that he would let us keep you up to the first half of the Winter, as we agreed, but after that he would have you at his home with Rose, if he had to steal you. He laughed, but he meant it, so see how _very_ welcome you are at Avondale."

"Oh, it is sweet to have so many people love me," Sprite said, gratefully, and her eyes were as bright as stars. She was tired with the long car ride, and with Princess Polly, she sped to her room, there to make her little self fresh, and fair for dinner.

"We're to share this room, and these two pretty beds are yours and mine," said Polly.

"We could have had separate rooms, but I wanted you with me, and beside, mamma said if you were with me, you couldn't be lonesome."

"Oh, I'd rather be with you," said little Sprite, "and what a lovely room it is!"

She saw every dainty bit of color, every charming detail of the furnishings, she saw the river as she looked from the windows, and the vines peeping in at the windows, and she wondered how it had happened that she now possessed such dear friends, who vied with each other in making her their little guest.

She opened her suit case, and took from it a pale blue frock, with a ribbon of the same tint for her hair.

The frock was of soft mull, and its coloring was like that of a pale aqua marine.

She combed out her long, waving hair, and quickly tied it with the blue ribbon, then, her hand tightly clasped in Polly's, descended the stairs.

Arthur Sherwood entered the hall just in time to see the two pretty figures on the stairway.

"Well, well, and so the little sea nymph has come to live at Sherwood Hall for a time. My dear little Sprite, I am truly glad to see you."

He took the slender hand that she offered him, and the three chatted gaily until dinner was served.

The fine dinner, exquisitely served, was a rare treat for Sprite, and the pleasant evening that followed made her at once feel that she was, already, a part of the family.

In her room, after the happy evening, Sprite wrote a loving letter to the dear father and mother at the home by the sea.

She addressed it, and placed the stamp upon it, and then gave it a place on the dresser where she would surely see it in the morning, and thus remember to post it.

Princess Polly would liked to have kept awake to talk, but Sprite was very tired, and soon her answers became so drowsy that Polly knew that she needed sleep and rest. Little Sprite had been the first to drop to sleep, but, accustomed to early rising, she was the first to wake. She slipped from her bed, glanced at Polly, saw that she had not yet

awakened, and quietly began to dress. She had learned, the evening before, that there was a mail box just across the street, and she now picked up the letter, and made her way down to the lower hall. The door stood wide open, only the screen door was fastened.

The maid, a few moments before, had opened the door that the fresh air might pass through the hall. Sprite slipped out into the garden, her letter in her hand.

She ran a short distance, then as the sunlight touched the glowing blossoms, she paused and looked about her.

Oh, what a fairy world it was! Her home at the shore had been placed on a broad stretch of sand, and only a few of the residences at Cliffmore boasted a flower, or tree on its grounds.

Now, with the garden gay with geraniums, tall gladioli, dahlias, and scarlet salvia, she looked in amazement and delight at the riot of color.

"Oh, how beautiful it is here!" she said.

Suddenly she remembered her precious letter.

She ran across the street, and slipped it in the box.

"There you go, and you'll tell the two dearest people in the world that I got here safely, and that everyone was dear to me. You'll tell them that I love them too."

Her heart was lighter, because now she knew that the letter that the dear ones at home were looking for, would soon be on its way.

She hurried back to the garden, where she sat for a long time watching the bees as they hovered over the flowers.

She would not go back to her room for fear of waking Polly, and she knew that she should not wander about the vacant lower rooms, so she decided to wait in the garden, until Princess Polly should come down.

She clasped her hands about her knee, and sat lost in a day dream. Her long rippling hair fell over her shoulders, and she made a lovely picture as she sat thinking of her home at the shore.

"The cliffs are white in the bright sunlight by this time," she said, softly, lest someone might hear her, "and the big gulls are flying over the water, or dropping to float on the crest of the waves.

"It is beautiful at home, and grand here at Avondale.

"I wonder if anyone knows if one is really finer than the other. They're so different."

Then again she sat dreaming. Sir Mortimer came around the corner of the house, and went straight to Sprite for the caress everyone offered him. He listened to her sweet voice as she told him what a fine cat he was, he arched his back, and purred his loudest.

After a time he lay down on the grass beside her, taking his morning sunbath.

Princess Polly, in the meantime, had awakened and missed Sprite. She dressed hastily.

As she passed the window a soft voice talking to Sir Mortimer made her pause and look out. She leaned from the window.

"Oh, there you are!" she cried. "I missed you, and I couldn't guess where you were. I'll come right down to the garden." She flew down the stairs, and out into the sunlight.

Sprite ran to meet her, and with their arms about each other, they paced up and down the broad piazza.

Sir Mortimer blinked at them as he sat in the sunlight, as if he approved of their merry chatter. Possibly he thought it fine that there were to be two little girls at Sherwood Hall to pet him.

"The garden is so lovely," Sprite said, as they paused to look out across the lawn.

"Come!" cried Polly. "I'll show you all the prettiest places."

The big cat followed them, trotting along the gravel walk, pausing whenever they did, as if all that Polly was showing was new to him.

And when they had admired the rippling brook that ran through the garden, the tall white lilies standing in queenly grace beside the stone wall, the terraces crowned with rose bushes, and the gorgeous beds of geraniums, they ran back to the piazza, and seated themselves in the hammock that swung in the breeze.

"Do you remember any of the pretty songs you used to sing last Summer when we were out on the beach, or sitting on the ledge?" Polly asked.

"There's one I always like to sing when I'm in a dory," Sprite said.

"Then let's rock this hammock, and play it's a dory, and while we're swinging, you sing," Polly said.

With a voice in which a thrill of happiness made wondrous music, little Sprite sang:

"Bright is the sky above us,
Blue is the sea below.
Seagulls are hovering 'round us
Fluttering to and fro.

Faith is the sky above us,
The sea is the earth below.
Gulls are the friends who love us,
Following where'er we go.

Sunshine above, around us,
White caps floating by,
None in the world is happier
Than you, my love, and I."

CHAPTER III

GWEN

Little Sprite Seaford felt so completely "at home," that it seemed to her as if she had always lived at Avondale. There were times when she felt homesick. At early morning, before Polly was awake, she would lie with wide open eyes, gazing around the lovely room, and missing the dear voices that always greeted her so cheerily. At twilight, when the shadows grew deeper, there would be a longing for the dear ones at home, and her loving little heart would ache, and she would have to struggle to keep back the tears.

She knew, however, that she must be a bright, cheerful little guest. Had not dear father and mother said so?

Throughout the sunny days she was the life of the merry playmates who lived so near that they were always together. Polly and Rose she had played with at the shore in the Summer, and at the children's party that Mrs. Sherwood had given, she had met the boys and girls who had come from Avondale for that evening.

They had all liked the "little Sea Nymph," as they had called her, and now were glad to renew the acquaintance.

There was one small girl who, thus far, had shown no interest in Polly's guest, and that was Gwen Harcourt.

She had seen Sprite with Polly, and her playmates, but she had watched them from a distance.

From her own piazza she could look across to Sherwood Hall, and see the children at play.

In a few days she had tired of watching the merry friends, and she longed to join them. She had heard Lena Lindsey say that Sprite was charming.

Leslie Grafton, only the day before, had said that one reason why she enjoyed playing with Sprite was because she was so *different* from any girl that she knew.

What was this "*difference*," that Leslie spoke of?

Harry Grafton had declared that little Sprite was a trump.

"What's a *trump*?" said Gwen, as she sat swinging her feet, and looking up and down the avenue.

"What's a *trump*?"

She was perched on the top of the stone post at the entrance to the driveway, and watching intently for a glimpse of little Sprite.

She had been curious about the new little girl ever since the first day that she arrived at Avondale. *Now*, she was *determined* to know her.

"If she'd go by while I'm sitting here I'd *make* her come into my garden. I'd like to have her all to myself the first time I talk to her," she said softly.

Of course Gwen wished to meet Sprite when she was quite alone. Anyone who had ever known Gwen would know why.

She knew that all of her playmates were aware that she told very large stories, and that none of them were true.

If she had Sprite, quite by herself, she could tell what she chose. Luck favored her, for she had sat on the great post but a moment longer, when a soft voice singing made her look up.

Sprite, her hands filled with flowers, was coming toward her.

She was looking down at her blossoms, and did not notice the child on the post.

"Bright, glist'ning summer sea,
Bring thou a ship to me,
Sailing so gallantly over the main.
Down deep within its hold
Will there be bags of gold,
Or sparkling gems untold,
All, all for me?
Now my heart cries to thee;
Bring not from o'er the sea
Bright glitt'ring gems for me, nor bags of gold.
I'd rather have a heart,
Mine from all else apart,
From him I'd never part,
Love's more than gold."

Little Sprite Seaford had learned the song in her home by the sea. Its words were tender, its melody graceful and sweet, but Gwen Harcourt cared little for music. Her only thought was to startle Sprite. With this delightful thought in her mind, she waited until Sprite was about to pass the post, when she slipped to the ground directly in front of her, causing her to "jump," and drop half of her flowers.

"Oh, how you frightened me!" she cried, as Gwen peeped impudently right into her face.

"Mustn't be a 'fraidie cat'!" she cried, then—"Here! I'll pick up your flowers."

With haste she snatched the flowers from the sidewalk, and thrusting them into Sprite's hand, she said:

"This is where I live. Come in. I want to know you. My name is Gwen Harcourt. What's yours?"

"I am Sprite Seaford," was the gentle answer.

"My whole name is Gwendolen Armitage Harcourt. Rather grand, isn't it?" Gwen asked, her hands on her hips, and her feet wide apart.

"Mine is just Sprite Seaford," she said, quietly.

"Don't you wish you had a middle name?" said Gwen. "It sounds fine."

"I don't think I care," said Sprite.

Gwen was rather surprised that Sprite seemed little interested.

"Come over here," she said, "and I'll show you something I guess you never saw before."

Without waiting to learn if Sprite cared to go, Gwen grasped her arm, and literally tugged her inside the gateway.

"See these rose bushes?" she asked.

"Well, they're out of blossom now, but they had much as, oh, I guess a hundred roses on them all at one time!"

Then seeing Sprite's look of surprise, she decided to enlarge her story.

"I guess there must have been a thousand, now I think of it," she said. "Papa paid twenty dollars a piece for them, and maybe it was more than that. I'm not quite sure."

Sprite made no comment.

"And I planted one of the bushes, and I'll tell you something real funny about it," Gwen said. "I planted it upside down just to see what it would do, and what do you s'pose? After it had been there 'bout a month I dug it up, and there were roses on it! It had blossomed down in the dirt! They were bigger than the ones that had been planted the right way, and they might have been even bigger if I hadn't dug them up so soon."

Sprite's truthful eyes were looking straight into Gwen's bold blue ones. "Are you sure that happened?" she asked.

"Well, what do you s'pose?" Gwen asked pertly, and then, without waiting for a reply she caught Sprite's hand and hurried with her into the great hall.

"I brought you in here to show you the pictures," she said, pointing to the family portraits that adorned the walls.

Sprite looked in admiration at the ladies in their quaint gowns of stiff brocade, and at the men in their lace frills, and satin waistcoats.

"The pictures are lovely," she said, "and are they portraits of people that really, truly lived once?"

"Oh, yes," cried Gwen, "and I'll tell you all about them.

"This lady with the pink gown was my great aunt Nora, and that man in the yellow waistcoat was my great uncle Nathan.

"That lady in green velvet was my great aunt Nina, and that young girl beside her was her daughter, Arline.

"That little old lady in velvet and lace was my great grandmother, and the next picture was my own grandma, and I've forgotten who that next one is, but the next lady's name was Jemima, and the one in yellow silk was Elvira, and the one in pink muslin was Honoriah, and the next one,—oh, let me think. What was her name? Oh, I know, it was Anastasia."

"Why, their names grow worse, and worse the farther you go down the hall!" cried Sprite.

"Why no they don't," said Gwen, "for over on this wall, the first picture, this one of the lady with the dog is called Lucretia, and that next one's name was Abigail."

"Well, their gowns are lovely," said Sprite, "but didn't they use to have just horrid names?"

"My mamma says those names are 'quaint,'" Gwen replied, "but come and see this portrait of a little girl. Guess who that is?"

"Oh, how could I?" said Sprite, "I've never known your people."

Gwen moved along until she stood close beside her, then she looked straight into Sprite Seaford's eyes, and nodding as she spoke, and shaking her forefinger, she said in a whisper:

"That's a portrait of me!"

"Why—ee!" exclaimed Sprite.

"That is a picture of me!" declared Gwen. "Do you dare to say it doesn't look like me?"

Gwen's eyes were flashing, but the sea captain's little daughter was no coward.

"Of course I dare," she said, "for your eyes are blue, and your hair is light, while the little girl in the picture has brown eyes, and brown curling hair."

"How do you know that my hair hasn't been that color, some time or other?" Gwen asked sharply.

"I don't s'pose I do know," Sprite said simply, "but I don't believe folks have brown hair and have it turn light yellow, and I don't believe brown eyes turn blue, so I don't see how that little girl in the picture is you."

Gwen was breathing fast. She was very angry, but she dared not say harsh words yet.

She wanted this little Miss Seafood to like her, and to be willing to play with her, so she only repeated: "I say that that little girl in the picture is me!"

Sprite turned toward the door.

"Princess Polly may be looking for me," she said, "so I'll go, now."

As she stepped out into the sunshine she remembered something that she should have said, and she turned.

"Thank you for letting me see the portraits," she said. "I'm glad you showed them to me."

"Well, I'm not," Gwen said, rudely. "I wish I hadn't, 'cause you don't b'lieve that pretty portrait is me."

Sprite looked at her with wondering eyes. She was thinking that it was strange that a little girl who wore lovely frocks, and lived in a handsome house was willing to be as rude as any little vagrant who roamed the beach at Cliffmore, gathering sea weed.

"Our house is just an old ship's hull turned upside down, and fixed up for a house, but mother never let me speak like that to anyone, and besides, I wouldn't want to," she thought.

She walked toward the avenue, Gwen close beside her.

"Good-bye," Sprite said, with a pleasant smile.

"I'll not say 'good-bye!'" cried Gwen. "All I'll say is: 'That portrait is a picture of me!'"

Her voice had risen to a shriek, and she stamped her foot.

Sprite, now wholly disgusted, turned and ran.

Mrs. Harcourt, from an upper window, saw Sprite running away from the house, just as Gwen's angry voice made itself heard.

"Oh, dear!" she sighed, "What a pity that of all the children that Gwen knows, not one really understands her."

The lady, to whom she spoke, looked up into her handsome face, and wondered how any intelligent woman could be so blind regarding her own child.

"She's so very high strung," continued Mrs. Harcourt, "that she is easily excited, and she's so very sensitive that her playmates are

constantly hurting her.”

”Why do you not urge her to bear with her little friends patiently, and thus help matters to glide more smoothly?”

”Ah, you, dear friend, like all the rest, fail to understand how fine, how extremely sensitive my little Gwen is,” Mrs. Harcourt responded.

At this point Gwen rushed up the stairs, stamping on every stair, and dashed into the room.

”I’m glad she’s gone!” she cried, flinging herself down on a chair near the window, a frown making her look as unpleasant as possible.

”Who was that child?” her mother asked, as she bent over her, kissing her flushed face, and brushing a yellow curl back from her forehead.

”She’s come to Avondale to stay all Winter with Princess Polly, and with Rose Atherton. I wanted to know her, I mean I thought I did, but now I don’t. I brought her in to see the portraits in our hall, and just for fun I told her that the picture of the little brown eyed girl was me.

”She wouldn’t believe it, and that made me mad. Of course it really wasn’t a portrait of me, but if I said it was, she ought to believe it?”

”My precious darling!” cried Mrs. Harcourt, ”the children never seem to be able to understand your wonderful imagination. The child was absurd to go off leaving you so unhappy. I’ll ask Mrs. Sherwood what sort of child she is.”

Gwen, having been petted and assured that her mother thought her perfect, ran from the room, and down to the garden where she sought something with which to amuse herself.

The cook, looking from the rear window, frowned darkly.

Gwen did not see her, because, with her back toward the house, she was trying to see if it would be possible to tie a knot in the cat’s tail.

The old cat objected, and struck at her, missing however, because Gwen jumped back.

”Ah, ye little varmint!” cried the cook, ”if they’s no person handy fer yez ter pester, thin yez fall back on the owld cat, poor crayture.”

A few moments she watched Gwen in silence, then again she spoke.

"There she goes tryin' to climb up onto the fountain basin. Sure I'll hov ter shpake ter her, and I don't want ter, but she risks anything."

Throwing up the window she shouted:

"Hi! Miss Gwen! Coom down off'n there, 'fore ye do be gittin' a big fall!"

Gwen turned and made an outrageous face, thus giving proof of her sweetness.

"Coom doon!" shouted the cook, but Gwen only giggled and remained exactly where she was.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT HAPPENED AT SCHOOL

Little Sprite Seaford thought Avondale the brightest place that any child ever lived in, and if the sky was blue, or if clouds hid the sun, she smiled and still insisted that it was a cheery place.

She had not forgotten the charm of her home at the shore, but she remembered that she always felt very gay when the sunlight glistened on the waves.

She remembered that when the sky was overcast, the waves were dark and sullen, and the great gulls flew far over the sea, her laugh lost its gaiety, and she forgot to sing her merry songs.

Here at Avondale were trees bright with leaves of red and yellow, gardens glowing with gorgeous fall flowers, and Sprite thought Avondale looked as if it were one huge garden, through which avenues had been cut, and houses, surrounded by spacious lawns, had been built.

School had opened a week earlier than usual, and Sprite already felt "at home."

She was a favorite with the boys and girls, and, to her great delight, she found that she had progressed in her studies, under her mother's guidance, so that, although a trifle younger than Princess Polly, she would be a member of the same class.

Polly, and Rose, and Sprite made a lovely trio, and older people meeting them as they tripped along together, marvelled that three such beautiful children, happened to be intimate neighbors.

Gwen Harcourt had not entered school on the first day, but one morning she appeared with the news that she should attend school all the year if she chose, but that she could leave at any time if she wished.

"Oh, but won't your mamma make you go to school?" a small girl asked.

"My mamma never makes me do anything!" declared Gwen sharply. "I guess that's so!" Rob Lindsey said, softly.

"What did you say?" Gwen asked.

"I don't dare to tell," declared Rob, in a teasing voice.

"You needn't!" cried Gwen, and she rudely turned her back toward Rob, and commenced to talk to Leslie Grafton.

She talked so fast that she hardly knew what she was saying, but she wished Rob Lindsey to think that she had quite forgotten that he was there.

The bell rang, and while the others turned to hasten toward the school house, Gwen walked along as if merely out for a stroll, and she entered the schoolroom after all the others were seated. The new teacher thought it a happening, but the pupils knew that Gwen had done it to learn if the teacher would rebuke her.

As her tardiness passed unnoticed, Gwen at once decided to do something more striking.

She was bright, and quick to learn, but she cared little for study, and she would have been placed in a much lower class, but for her mother's great influence.

Mrs. Harcourt had listened very patiently while it had been made clear to her that her small daughter was not fitted for the class in which her little friends were placed.

She was a charming woman, and she had begged, even insisted that Gwen be placed in the class with Princess Polly, Rose Atherton, and Sprite Seaford, and thus given the opportunity to prove that she could "keep up" with her class.

The new teacher was amused, and believing that Gwen's stay in the class would be of short duration, she yielded.

Gwen never studied, and on her first day, she decided that, as she thought herself very smart, she could, by listening to what others were reciting, do very well without "bothering with books."

That was what she said, and the first question in Geography that she answered, made Rob Lindsey call her a "star pupil."

"What is the capital of Brazil?" Gwen stared for a moment, then she tossed her head as she said, pertly:

"Oh, anyone knows _that_!"

"_Next_!" said the teacher.

Gwen was surprised.

She had expected to be coaxed.

A few moments later she heard a small girl talking of the great Amazon river. She caught the name, and later when asked to name the largest river in Africa, she sprang to her feet, and glibly shouted:

"The Amazon!"

"Well, why do you laugh?" she asked, turning angrily to stare at the laughing class.

She was offended, when told to sit down, and decided to tell her mother that she had not received enough attention.

"I guess I'll say 'snubbed,' because that will make mamma _sure_ to take my part," she softly whispered.

She changed her mind, she often did that, and thought that she would not tell at home that she had been displeased.

She chose to attend school a week longer, or perhaps a number of weeks longer, because Miss Kenyon, just before closing for the afternoon, stated that on Friday of each week an hour would be reserved for recitations, and for the reading of compositions.

Gwen thought she saw a chance to shine, and she meant to do it.

She had heard a conversation, not intended for her ears, when a lady calling at her home had inquired for the little daughter of the house.

"Oh, Gwen is really a wonderful child," Mrs. Harcourt had said, "and while she has a positive talent for reciting fine poetry, her compositions are _so_ original that they are really _startling_!"

"Oh, really!" the lady had replied, in a manner that showed that she was bored.

Gwen had leaned over the baluster in the upper hall, and drank in every word of praise that had been uttered.

The following Friday the pupils arrived with compositions that they had prepared.

As is usual, in any such school event, some were really good, others were neither very good, nor very bad, but all others were forgotten when Gwen Harcourt commenced to read.

If Gwen Harcourt was vain, conceited, too much of a baby for a child of her age, it was largely the fault of her silly mother, whose beauty, and power to charm were great, but whose mind was exceedingly shallow.

She loved Gwen deeply, even too deeply to see any faults, and so in her blind love, she of course, could never correct these defects that she could not see, and that made the pretty child exceedingly unattractive.

Her composition was a good example of what a silly child, with an even sillier mother could do, in the way of original work, for surely the essay was _original_.

Gwen pranced up onto the platform, made a graceful little bow, and then, nodding to the class she said: "This really, truly happened! E'hem!

"The Ostrich.

"The ostrich that I'm to tell about was in the Zoo in a big city where I went once, and he must have been the biggest ostrich that anyone ever saw.

"He was as big as a horse, and so he ought to have been called a _hoss_trich.

"His feathers were all the colors that folks wear on their hats,—"
She paused to note what impression she was making, and a doubting small boy, murmured;

"Oo—o—o!"

Gwen frowned, and commenced to read again.

"The ostrich didn't look much like the big white owl in a cage near him, because the owl had bigger eyes."

A few of the pupils giggled, and one in the front row muttered.

"I don't suppose there was any difference in their legs!"

"The ostrich is graceful,"

She paused again, because at this absurd statement Dick Minton laughed aloud.

"Oh, graceful!" whispered Dick.

"Richard!" said Miss Kenyon, her voice deeply reproving.

"Well, the idea!" said Dick. "Graceful!"

"Gwen, tell me where you obtained these strange ideas about the ostrich," Miss Kenyon said.

"Did you read some book about birds, or did someone tell you these things that you have written?"

"These are my own ideas," Gwen answered, proudly.

"I didn't have to read or be told what to write. Mamma says I'm a genius, and she read this composition, and she said it was fine, so I don't care what you say about it!"

"You may be seated," said the teacher, but Gwen, not heeding what she said, rushed from the school-house, intent upon telling her mother how very badly she had been treated.

Miss Kenyon told the pupils that they had been rude to laugh, or make comments when another pupil was taking any part in the exercises.

They knew that, but they also knew that Gwen's composition had been "funny."

Gwen rushed home with her composition in her hand.

Of course Mrs. Harcourt praised and comforted her.

"Absurd!" she cried. "Did she wish you to consult a dictionary? Any ordinary child could do that, but to evolve such odd ideas! Why that is genius! She is dull if she doesn't know great creative genius when she sees it!"

"And must I go to school again to-morrow?" Gwen asked.

"No, indeed!" Mrs. Harcourt said, "I shall send you, hereafter, to private school, where your talents will be appreciated."

There was another pupil who was far more uncomfortable at school than Gwen had ever been, and that was Gyp.

Placed in a class with children of six or seven, the awkward boy felt ill at ease, and out of place. Yet, while they were years younger than he, they had already spent more hours in the class room than he ever had, and pages that they read with ease, he struggled over. He was a true gypsy, and he loved his freedom, and the fresh air.

Now, as he sat at his desk, book in hand, he thought of his long tramps over field and meadow, through forest and valley, and in his heart he hated school, and the people who forced him to attend.

"What's the use?" he muttered, under his breath.

"I can catch woodchucks, and birds and squirrels," he said, softly, "and _once_ I caught a fox, but what kin I do here? Nothing but hold a ol' book!" A sharp command to "stop muttering, and sit still," served to increase his wrath.

He knew that it was not the teacher who was responsible for his presence at school, but he thought that she _wished_ him to be there, because she insisted that he sit still, and she would not let him leave the room.

"It was the p'liceman what _brung_ me here, but I'll bet 'twas her _axed_ him to," he whispered, thus showing how angry were his thoughts, and how greatly he needed the training that the teacher stood ready to give.

His mother had not dared to keep him at home, although she needed his help.

Gyp could not understand why she had agreed to let him go to a place where he could neither _earn_ nor _steal_ food for the family. _He_ felt that she had not stood by him.

He dared not play truant, because he so feared the policeman who had said that he _must_ attend school.

Poor Gyp! Ignorant, and born of ignorant parents, he believed, as they did, that if he did not go to school, he would be sent to jail! Jail was the only thing that Gyp thought worse than school. He considered himself a prisoner in school, but _after four_ he was _free_, so that jail was worse only because one could not get out of jail at all!

"If it's school or jail, I'll go to _school!_" he said.

For weeks he appeared each morning and afternoon, sullen, and unhappy. Then something occurred that made him change his mind, and his eyes

grow bright, and his heart grow lighter.

Out of all Avondale, Princess Polly was the only person who spoke kindly to him. Wild, careless Gyp fairly worshipped the blue eyed, golden haired little girl who always gave him a pleasant word, and a smile.

One morning, after a heavy storm, the avenues were in fair condition, until the pupils reached a place where they must cross to the opposite side of the street to enter the school yard.

Gyp was not afraid of muddying his shoes, because they were so shabby that a little mud could not make them look worse. He sat on the wall and laughed as he saw the girls try to cross the puddle without wetting their feet.

"Oh, look at the ducks! No, geese!" he cried, adding: "Don't be 'fraid. Water won't hurt ye!"

After the other girls had reached the sidewalk, Princess Polly came tripping along.

She had intended to walk to school with Rose and Sprite, but Sprite, not quite ready, had asked Polly to go along, and she would soon be ready, and would overtake her.

Gyp saw her coming, and stopped laughing.

"_Jiminy_!" he ejaculated. "Somebody ought ter do _suthin' _!"

A second later he cried:

"Stop! Oh, stop just a minute, will ye? I'll _fix_ that puddle!"

Polly _did_ stop.

Snatching a piece of board that chanced to be lying on the ground just over the wall, he flew to where Polly was standing, placed his tiny plank over the puddle, and felt the greatest pride when he saw her walk across, her dainty shoes without a spot upon them.

"Oh, Gyp, you were nice to do that for me! Thank you, so much!" she said.

He hardly knew what to reply, but muttering something about being "no bother at all," he ran around to the other side of the school-house that she might not see his confusion. One thought filled his mind. He would go to school! Yes, he would go to school every day, so that morning and afternoon he might be where he could see her, and do any

little favor, or offer any aid, that she might need.

Another thought soon followed. He would work at his studies. He would not be at the foot of the class.

He must work for promotion! He must catch up with pupils of his own age, for then he would be nearer Princess Polly, and thus able to do any little favor, or any slight service that might please her.

CHAPTER V

A BREATH OF THE SEA

It was with Polly and Rose that Sprite was happiest. She liked Lena and Leslie, and all the others.

The boys were her trusted friends, and she looked forward to a gay winter with these new friends. One sunny morning Uncle John Atherton, with Rose in the motor beside him, drove over to Sherwood Hall to call for Polly and Sprite.

"We're going for a long ride, Rose, so tell Polly and Sprite to take their coats."

They were soon ready, and running down the walk, their coats on their arms.

"Where are we going?" they cried, as they reached the sidewalk. Without waiting for an answer they clambered into the car.

"Where are we going?" they asked again. "Oh, let's all three sit on one seat!"

Uncle John turned to look at the three eager faces.

"Well, well! What a lucky man I am!" he cried. "Three fine young ladies all out for a ride with me. Are you ready?"

"All ready!" cried the merry chorus, "but where are we going?"

"Now that's my secret," Uncle John said, with a laugh, "but I will say that some business took me to a very charming place this morning, and I thought I'd like company on the way. I trust you're willing to go?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" cried three laughing voices.

"Then we'll start at once," said Uncle John, as if he had been waiting in order to be re-assured.

Over the road they flew, talking and laughing gaily.

"Rose, do you know where we're going?" Polly asked.

"Oh, her Uncle John would tell her," said Sprite.

"He didn't," declared Rose, then; "did you, Uncle John?" she cried.

"I certainly did not tell Rose," he said, "and after another half hour has passed, you three little friends must commence to look about you, and see if you see anything that looks at all familiar."

"Tell us when the half hour is up," said Polly, "and we'll begin looking."

They were soon running along country roads, where men were busy in the fields, and where early fall wild flowers bordered the roads.

Then in a brief space, they began to miss the wild flowers, and to notice bold bits of ledge, the roads became more sandy, and as they swung around a bend, they caught a glimpse of the sea.

"Cliffmore! Oh, it's Cliffmore!" cried Sprite her hands tightly clasped, and her eyes bright as stars.

"Isn't it Cliffmore, Mr. Atherton?" she asked, her little hand patting his shoulder nervously, as she waited his reply.

He stopped the car, and turned to gaze up into the lovely, eager face.

Sprite, standing, her long golden hair blowing back from her face, looked for all the world like a sea fairy. Shading her eyes with her hand, she looked out across the sea that she loved so well.

Then she turned to find his kind brown eyes looking up at her, as if he were about to speak.

"Dear little girl, I have indeed brought you to Cliffmore. I was obliged to come here on a little business trip to look after some of my property, and I took you for sweet company, and because I thought we'd give two very dear people who live at the 'Syren's Cave,' a great surprise."

"Oh, I hope father isn't out on the water," cried Sprite. "Mother will be there, but I want to see them both!"

"I looked out for that," was the cheery reply, "and I wrote to tell Captain Seaford that I should call upon him to-day. I did not say that I should bring some callers with me."

"Oh, what fun!" cried Polly.

"_Won't_ they be surprised?" said Rose.

Uncle John turned from the road, and out onto the beach.

The tide was low, and they bowled along over the hard white sand, little Sprite sitting with her hands tightly clasped, and her eyes riveted upon the distant speck that she knew to be her home, while Rose on one side, and Polly on the other, closely watched her pretty, eager face.

Captain Seaford, sitting just outside the door, was endeavoring to mend a net, but constant watching for the coming of Captain Atherton made the task of mending progress slowly.

"I must spunk up a little," he said, "for I want to use this net," but in spite of his resolve, he was soon watching, as before, for the coming of his friend.

At last he arose from the low stool on which he had been sitting, throwing the net down in a heap on the sand.

Mrs. Seaford, seated indoors, was busy, her needle flying in and out, darning one of the captain's socks.

"I can't keep my mind on my work," he said. "I tie a knot, and then look up to see if John Atherton is in sight. I never acted like that before. I'm always glad to see him, but for some strange reason, I can't wait patiently for him to arrive."

"I'm doing the same thing," his wife said. "I can't keep my mind on this mending. I take three stitches and then look out of the window. Isn't it strange?"

The honking of a horn made them hasten to the door.

They saw the big car, they dimly saw Captain Atherton, Polly, and Rose, but with startling clearness they saw the one thing on earth that they held most dear,—little Sprite.

She sprang from the car and ran to them, and what a greeting she received!

Captain Seaford declared that it was the sunlight that made his eyes water, but gentle Mrs. Seaford made no excuse for her tear-wet lashes.

When the first excitement was over, they were invited to come in and rest in the quaint living-room of the Seafords' home.

"I thought when I read your letter, Captain Seaford, that you and your wife were missing little Sprite even more than you had dreamed possible. I have watched Sprite closely, and sometimes I have thought that she was homesick. If we make the trip once a fortnight, we shall all be happier."

"Including yourself, John Atherton," said Captain Seaford, "for I know you as well as you know yourself. You are never quite content, unless planning pleasure for others. Oh, I know it, and it's no use to deny what I say."

"As Captain Atherton is a truthful man, he's not likely to deny it," said Mrs. Seaford, "and now if you will all enjoy a shore dinner, I'll ask you to be my guests."

"I know of nothing more tempting," Captain Atherton said, and then, because he believed that Mrs. Seaford would enjoy an hour when she could have Sprite quite by herself, he took Rose and Princess Polly over to "The Cliffs," where they might amuse themselves, while he inspected the work that was being done.

The time passed swiftly, and when Polly and Rose had seen all the places about the house where they had played during the summer, and Uncle John had satisfied himself that repairs that were being made wholly pleased him, they found that it was about the time that Mrs. Seaford had set for their return.

"Come, ladies," he said, and they ran down the driveway, laughing and talking, and soon in the big car, were spinning down the beach.

As they drew near to the "Syren's Cave," Captain Seaford at the door, sounded a long, sweet note on the horn. Polly and Rose waved their handkerchiefs, and Sprite ran out to greet them.

It was a sunny day, with a fresh, cool breeze blowing from the East, and when they were seated around the table, the big tureen filled with hot chowder seemed just what their keen appetites craved.

Boiled fish, garnished with cress followed the chowder, and simple pudding, served with cream, furnished the dessert.

It surely was not an elaborate dinner, but to the guests it seemed the finest treat that they had ever enjoyed.

The long ride in the fresh breeze had made them eager for the noon meal, and the sea food, daintily cooked, was a feast.

They lingered at the table, and Mrs. Seaford, and the three little friends listened, and laughed at the merry stories that the two sea captains told.

They were all in the big car when Captain Atherton said:

"Oh, now I think of it; there's a package, and a basket in this car that I meant to leave here, if you'll kindly store them for me."

Captain Seaford, never guessing what the parcel, or big basket contained, answered heartily:

"Of course I'll store them for you, dear friend, as long as you like," and he hastened to take them, carrying them into the house.

"Good-byes" had been said, when John Atherton turned to say:

"Oh, will you please open the parcel, and the basket. They're too tightly wrapped, I think."

"Ah, I know now that 'tis for myself you wish me to store the heavy parcel, and the loaded basket. The heart within thy brave breast is bigger, and warmer than that of any man I ever knew."

It was as Captain Seaford had said.

When, with his wife beside him, he opened the basket, he found it filled with luscious fruit, beneath which lay a huge parcel of sugar.

In the big bundle that the sturdy captain had found it a task to tug to the house, was another large bag of sugar, a bag of flour, a parcel containing beans, a giant squash, and tea and coffee.

"Could he possibly know that at just this time, these gifts are especially welcome?" Mrs. Seaford asked.

"I can't imagine how he could find that out, but surely they could not have come at a better time," was the earnest reply.

He turned to hide the tears that had sprung to his honest eyes, when, for the first time, he saw a large firkin, set just inside the door, and, as if to keep it company, a large sack leaned against it. The firkin, as the captain had called it, proved to be a huge tub of fine butter, and the sack was filled with potatoes.

A card was pinned to the sack.

"These few articles I leave instead of my card.
John."

"Ah, John Atherton, faithful friend, may every blessing be thine," said Mrs. Seaford, with trembling lips, to which Captain Seaford, gently breathed, "Amen."

On the inside of the cover of the butter tub was tacked this note:

"A load of coal for winter comfort will arrive this afternoon. I
couldn't bring it in the auto.
John."

"And see him make a joke by saying that he couldn't bring it in the auto!" said Captain Seaford, "and thus try to make light of his generosity. He doesn't blind us to his great goodness, though. He's one man of a thousand!"

In the auto the three playmates were gaily talking, singing snatches of blithe little songs, as they sped along the beach, on the way to Avondale.

"I've loved to be with you before this trip," said Sprite, "but sometimes I've longed to see home, but now that I'm to go there every fortnight I'll be gay, and happy all the time. Oh, Mr. Atherton, I thank you for promising that!"

"And in return, little Sprite, I'll ask a favor," he said. "Call me 'Uncle John,' just as Rose does, and Polly does the same."

"Oh, I will, I will!" she cried. "I've always wanted to."

"You will feel more at home with an uncle so near," he said, gently.

Already the boys and girls of Avondale were talking of the opening of school. Of all the eager ones, Sprite Seaford was the most excited. Her mother's careful training had fitted her for a class among girls of her own age, but she did not know that.

She hoped that she might be in the class with Princess Polly, and Rose, but wherever her place in school might be, she was eager for the "first day" to arrive.

One morning Polly and Sprite were on the piazza, before breakfast, and after pacing up and down for a while, they went down the steps, and around behind the house to search for Sir Mortimer.

"He's sometimes in under the bushes taking a nap," said Polly, and they crouched to look under the shrubbery. An ear-piercing screech made them spring to their feet, and there, flying down the road, was Gyp, tearing along as if in fright, but what could so have startled wild, careless Gyp?

He did not stop running, nor did he slacken his pace, but looking straight ahead, as if not daring to look back, to learn if he were followed, he raced down the street, fear plainly showing in every movement of his thin wiry legs.

"What could have frightened him?" Polly asked. Sprite could not guess.

Now, slowly going over his beat a patrolman passed, walking along as if haste were a thing unheard of.

"That's what made him run!" cried Princess Polly.

"What? The policeman!" cried Sprite. "Why he isn't chasing him."

"Of course he isn't," Polly replied, "but Gyp is so afraid of any one of the policemen in this town, that he runs screaming just like that the minute he sees one."

Together they watched, until Gyp was out of sight.

"They say folks here in Avondale are going to make Gyp go to school," said Polly, "but I shouldn't think they could do it, and if they could, just think how he'd act!"

"I can't think," said Sprite, her eyes dancing, "but I know I'll like to watch him the first day."

"We couldn't watch him if we wanted to because he wouldn't be in our room," Polly said.

"Well, then he'll be above us, because he's bigger than we are," said Sprite. Polly laughed as she said;

"Oh, no he won't. He's never been to school but a few months, as big as he is. He'll be in some class below us."

"Why, then he'll be with little children," said Sprite, "and won't he look funny when he's such a big boy?"

"Well, that's where he'll have to be, if they can make him go!"

CHAPTER VI

A DELIGHTFUL CALL

One Saturday morning, Rose skipped along the sidewalk on the way to Aunt Judith's cottage. Her cheeks were very pink, and her eyes were bright.

Uncle John was to take her with him in the big automobile that afternoon, and they were to call, he said, on a very dear friend of his.

"Do I know her?" Rose had asked.

"You will, when you see her," was the laughing reply.

"Is it some one I've seen?" she asked, her face alight with interest.

"Yes, and no," Uncle John said.

"And that is all I'll tell you," he continued, "because I'd like you to recognize her at once, without any hint from me."

"And I'll enjoy the forenoon with Aunt Judith," she said as she opened the little gate.

Aunt Judith, sitting by the window saw her coming, and hastened to the door.

"I've been watching a half hour to see you push open the gate, and come in," she said.

"Oh, Aunt Judith! I'm not late," Rose said, "for look! I said I'd come over here at nine, and it's just nine by your clock."

"Dear child, you are very prompt, and the only reason that I sat watching is because I wanted to see you the moment you came in sight. Now take off your things," she said, "and then we'll sit down, and talk over the plans for our party."

Rose was delighted. What little girl wouldn't be?

"First of all, dear, I had a great surprise this morning. A very great surprise, and your Uncle John Atherton gave it to me."

"Oh, Uncle John is always doing something nice, for somebody!" cried Rose.

"I never knew how good, how kind he could be," Aunt Judith said, brushing away a happy tear. "He came here one evening, and said he'd come to cheer me, and he certainly succeeded. We talked a little while, and in his pleasant way he questioned me, trying to learn if I was feeling prosperous. I didn't like to tell him, but he made me, and Rose, my cellar is stocked with all the wood and coal that I could use this Winter. There are winter vegetables, apples, two big hams, a barrel of flour,—Rose! I never felt so rich in all my life! Think of it! Winter coming, and my cellar full!"

"Oh, Aunt Judith! Do you wonder that I love him?"

"Who could help it?" was the eager question, "And that's not all, for with the idea that he hadn't done enough, this morning when I opened my back door a neat looking little maid stood there.

"I'm sent here, m'am, by your relative, Mr. Atherton, who says I'm to work for you until you get tired of me, which he says m'am, he hopes won't be soon."

"I was tired this morning and when I found a little maid engaged to do my work for me, I couldn't speak for a moment, because I was so full of thanks, that they almost choked me."

"Now, you can stay in the dear little sitting-room, while the work in the kitchen is being done for you. No wonder you feel rich," cried Rose.

"And now," said Aunt Judith, "we'll talk about the party."

"Wait just a minute, 'til I get my little stool. There! Now I'll listen, and I'm wild to hear."

"I wish this party to be as nearly as possible like the one that I enjoyed when I was little. First of all, I shall make some draperies for these windows of flowered chintz. I found a whole piece up in my store room the other day, and its gay flowered pattern looked very like the curtains in the home I so well remember. There are fine old hand-made rugs in the store room. I've never cared for them, but now I know that they will look right with the flowered chintz curtains. Now come and see what I have here in this little cupboard."

"There! Won't these look bright and pretty on my mantel?" she asked.

"Oh, lovely! Lovely!" cried Rose. "Where did you get them, and what are they called?"

"They are called candelabra, and are really ornamental candlesticks. These clear, finely cut pendants of glass will catch and reflect light. We'll play old-fashioned games, we'll have an old-fashioned treat, and

we'll wear real old-time costumes. It will not be a grand party, but I believe the children will enjoy it, for it will, at least, be different from any party that they have ever attended."

Aunt Judith worked all the morning, stitching the hems for the chintz curtains, and Rose pulled out the bastings, threaded needles, and in many ways helped to make the pretty things for the little front parlor.

"If it wasn't for school I could come again Monday and help you," Rose said.

"I shall easily do all that is needed," Aunt Judith replied, "for now I have a little maid, I have more time for myself, and she said she would be pleased to help me decorate for the party. I think she really wishes to have a part in the preparations."

"You have beautiful old china," said Rose, "and the boys and girls will like the nice things served on such pretty plates."

"Now, go into the next room, and see what I left hanging over a chair. You may try it on, and then come out here, and let me see you," Aunt Judith said.

"What fun!" cried Rose, and she laughed gaily as she ran to "try on" the quaint costume.

"Oh, the beautiful dress!" she said when she saw the dainty frock that Aunt Judith had chosen for her. She quickly removed her own dress, and soon she was looking at her reflection in the mirror. She took the hand mirror, that she might see the back of the costume.

The little maid peeped in. She, too, had been trying on the quaint dress that Aunt Judith intended her to wear.

And when at last the little clock chimed the hour at which she had promised to leave the cottage that she might be at home to lunch with Uncle John, she said "goodbye," and ran down the path, her mind filled with thoughts of the promised party, and of the delight of her playmates when they should be entertained by Aunt Judith, and for the first time, be a part of an old-fashioned party.

Uncle John was on the broad piazza waiting for her, and together they went in to lunch. Later, in the big automobile, they rode in a different direction from any that Rose had ever travelled over, and she looked up at Uncle John, as if she were wondering if he had forgotten that there was a call to be made before they turn homeward.

He turned to the right, and then, after a short ride, drove up a long private avenue bordered with odd, foreign-looking trees. Although the foliage was gone, one could see by the form of the trunk and branches

that they were not the trees usually seen at Avondale. The house, a stately homestead, stood well back from the street, and the porch, with its colonial pillars, gave grandeur to the entrance. And when they were seated in the handsome parlor, Rose looked about her, and wondered who it might be that Uncle John had brought her to see.

A slight sound, a rustling of silken drapery, and a young woman, lovely as a vision, entered, offered her hand to Captain Atherton, and then turning, she looked at the little girl whose brown eyes told of admiration.

"And this, John, is Rose? Little Rose Atherton?"

"This truly is my little Rose. And now, Rose, this is Miss Iris Vandmere, and I wish you two to be the best of friends. Tell me, do you remember if you have ever met her, or seen her before to-day?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" cried Rose. "She is the lovely lady in the locket picture, I know she is!"

"I am, indeed, the girl in the locket miniature, and now, as you have seen me before coming here, don't look upon me as a stranger. I want you to learn to like me, dear."

There was pleading in the sweet voice, and Rose took the slender white hand in hers.

"I won't have to learn to like you, because I love you now. Anyone would love you, you are so sweet, so bright to look at," Rose said, and Iris bent her lovely head, and kissed the upturned face.

"Oh, Uncle John! There never was, there never will be anyone so dear, so lovely," sighed Rose, when they were once more in the automobile. "See how sweet she looks, waving her hand to us! When will you take me to her again?"

"Rose, little girl, you have pleased me to-day, and you shall often go with me to the beautiful old house, to see the beautiful girl who lives there. As I said this afternoon, I wish you to be the best of friends."

Of course the news of Aunt Judith's party flew through the neighborhood, and many were the questions that Rose was asked to answer.

To each, she shook her curly head, and made the same reply.

"Aunt Judith intends it to be quaint, and everything will be old-fashioned, and we are all to wear real old-time costumes, but that is all I will tell you, because Aunt Judith wishes it to seem quaint, and a bit of a surprise when you come. It won't be any surprise at all if I tell you all about it now."

"Don't you tell it, Rose, not even to me," said Princess Polly.

"Nor me!" cried Sprite.

"If she's kind enough to plan a party for us children, we ought to let her have it just as she wishes it to be."

Gyp sat upon the wall, listening to all that was being said. He was full of mischief, and often he had annoyed Aunt Judith with his pranks.

"She's agoin' ter make a party fer 'em!" he said to himself.

He still sat on the wall, swinging his skinny legs when those who had stood talking of the event had walked together down the street. Polly and Sprite had lagged behind to talk with Rose until a maid had called to Polly that Mrs. Sherwood wished them to come in.

Rose turned toward home, and was humming as she walked along, when she heard her name called softly.

She looked up and down the street. Then she saw Gyp.

"Do you know who called me?" she asked.

"Yep!" he answered, pertly.

"Well, who did?" queried Rose.

"I did," he said, watching her closely. "I axed yer is she going ter have a big party?"

"She can't. It would be too costly, and the cottage is too small, but she is generous and kind to give us any party at all, and oh, Gyp!" she cried, moving nearer to him, "I do wish you wouldn't tease her."

Gyp wriggled.

"She said she hated me!" he said.

"Well, she might have been angry, but she likes boys. I've heard her say so," Rose replied.

"I ain't just a boy. I'm a Gypsy boy. That's different."

"Princess Polly is always kind to her, and I know it would please her if you stopped teasing Aunt Judith," Rose said.

That was just the thing to have said!

Gyp was determined to win Polly's approval at all costs. He sprang from the low wall, and rushed off to the old shanty that his family called "home."

There he found an old basket, and rushing off into the heart of the woods, he returned with a quantity of fine shellbarks that he had gathered and hoarded. Two days before the party was to occur he obtained a flour bag, no one knew how, emptied the basket of nuts into it, filling it about three-quarters full.

Long and hard he labored over the note that he tied to the bag. Sneaking to the back door of the cottage, he dropped the bag on the upper step, gave a tremendous knock, and then raced off to the woods.

Aunt Judith was more than half afraid to open the big bag, but finally, gathering courage, she cut the string, and then peeped in.

The laboriously written note fell to the floor. She picked it up, and for a moment, stared at it in great surprise.

"Ter Missis Ant Joodith Im sorry ive evir plagd yer an them nutts is 4 yor party coss I want yer ter no I meen whut i say. Arftur this I wil tri hard ter be yor frend,

"Gyp."

"Well, of all things!" she cried, when at last she had made sense out of the fearfully spelled note.

"Poor, wild Gyp! Who ever dreamed that he had a heart or a conscience! Indeed he shall be my friend if that will keep him from annoying me, and perhaps I can find a way to befriend him.

"Everyone is ready to lift a hand against him, so that there is nothing to tempt him to be really good, nor to encourage him to try.

"Strange little Arab! I wonder what prompted him to give his store of nuts to me, and really that fearfully spelled note has a bit of sincerity in it. I must tell John Atherton about it. I'll keep the note, and show it to him."

Often she paused to take the note from its retreat behind the clock, read it, and replace it. She looked from the window whenever she passed it, but not a glimpse of Gyp did she obtain.

She could not imagine what had caused the little imp to leave his gift of nuts at her door, or yet more wonderful, what had prompted him to write his friendly little note. Its outrageous spelling was droll, but its kindly spirit was evident. He had attended school because he was compelled to, but he had paid but little attention to his books.

The note had kept him busy for fully a half hour, and he considered it a fine specimen of letter writing when it was completed.

He thought that few boys could have done better, and he felt that in writing it, he had literally "covered himself with glory."

CHAPTER VII

AUNT JUDITH'S PARTY

The flowered chintz draperies hung at the windows, the pink roses, and green leaves on its shiny surface looked fairly gaudy. The candles danced and flickered in the candelabra, evergreen framed every picture on the walls.

Aunt Judith's quaint sofa and chairs had always been covered with crimson repp, and the color seemed brighter in the evening light.

The old hand-made rugs looked quaint upon the floor, and the logs in the grate burned gaily, as if anticipating the arrival of the little guests.

Of all the fine, quaint things in the room, Aunt Judith was surely the finest, and the quaintest. Her gown was of old-time print, a white ground upon which bouquets of pansies, purple and yellow, had been finely printed. Her black eyes were bright with excitement, and in her glossy black hair, she had placed an old silver comb.

Her sleeves were elbow length, and she wore long black silk mitts. She had made her toilette with great care, and she now stood on the hearth rug, nervously opening and shutting a small folding fan.

The little maid peeped in.

"Please ma'am, I hear 'em comin'," she said.

"Wait 'til they ring, and then answer the bell," said Aunt Judith.

The little maid looked very pretty, and she was delighted to be "in costume," for the occasion. Her skirt, of heavy cotton, was white,

with wide pink stripes. Her waist was blue with a large white kerchief, and on her flaxen head was a white cap with a frill that made her rosy little face quite pleasing.

Greta liked her new place. She liked her new mistress, too, and the work at the little cottage was light.

Aunt Judith was a worker, and together they kept the pretty rooms in perfect order.

The bell rang sharply, Greta opened the door, and the quaintest little figures that ever were seen came tripping into the hall.

It was not to be a ceremonious affair, so Greta took their wraps at the door, and they entered the little parlor to greet Aunt Judith.

Princess Polly in crisp print, with yellow primroses on a white ground, a pale green kerchief, and yellow ribbons in her hair, was fair, and lovely to look upon.

Rob Lindsey in brown homespun with a yellow vest, walked beside her, looking very like a lad of the olden time.

Lena Lindsey, in a green and white striped gown, a wreath of white roses and green leaves in her hair, with Leslie Grafton in scarlet linen with white lace frills at her neck, and in her sleeves, were two quaint lassies, and Harry Grafton in gray linen with huge white collar, and gaily flowered tie, made a trio that delighted Aunt Judith.

She had asked Rose to come as a guest, instead of standing with her to receive.

She had wished to see dear little Rose Atherton among her other guests, simply because she thus could see her more in the same way that she saw the other children, and she wanted to judge if she looked like that other little Rose Atherton who once had worn that same gown.

Uncle John knew that it was to be a children's party, but he decided to accept Aunt Judith's invitation to be present, and enjoy their pleasure with her.

Shouts of laughter greeted his costume! Knee breeches of yellow linen, a waistcoat of white linen damask, with lace frills on his bosom and at his wrists, together with a coat of flowered striped material, made him look like some old portrait suddenly alive.

Rose close beside him, in the pretty frock that Aunt Judith had loaned her, clung to his right arm as they entered together, little Sprite Seaford on his left.

Her gown was one that her great grand aunt had once worn, and it was most becoming. Uncle John Atherton had especially asked her to go to the party with Rose and himself. Her yellow hair was braided in two long braids and crowned with a muslin cap. Her frock was blue, with white blossoms upon it, and from its belt hung a steel bead bag that held her handkerchief.

Gwen was not invited.

Aunt Judith detested her rude ways, and she would not choose a guest who might spoil a pleasant evening by her bad behavior.

A young friend of Uncle John's arrived a bit late, and surely his costume was the most unusual of any of the guests. Captain Atherton had seen the little suit in an antique shop in England. He had purchased it, believing that some such occasion as the present might occur, when the droll coat and trousers, the little waistcoat, and the comical cap would be just the thing for a slender lad to wear. Walter Langdon was indeed a quaint figure, as, with Captain Atherton, he went forward to greet Aunt Judith, and be introduced to the other guests.

His coat, a funny little "swallow tail," was of yellow green, his trousers matched it, his waistcoat, or vest, was striped, lilac and white, and his cap, green like the suit, had a long tassel hanging down on one side. His fair hair, in a soft bang, showed below the edge of his cap, and his eyes, wide open and merry, appeared to be just ready for a gay laugh.

He knew that he looked absolutely comical, and he thought it great fun to appear at the party in a costume that provoked laughter. He proved to be a bright, cheery boy, full of fun, and wit, and soon the other boys and girls felt as if they had always known him.

Uncle John wore a costume that had belonged to his great, great uncle, and he looked very handsome in it. He made them all laugh by saying that he wished that his ancestor had been just a wee bit larger, because then the suit would have been somewhat easier, instead of such a _close fit_.

But while he seemed pleased with all of his new friends, it was Rose Atherton whom Walter liked best of all.

"And now," said Aunt Judith, "I've tried to make this party a truly old-fashioned one, and what do you say to playing some very old-fashioned games?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" they cried. "What shall we play first?"

"Blind Man's Buff," cried Uncle John, "and I'll blind first. Here, Rose! Tie this handkerchief over my eyes!"

Rose tied the handkerchief, and then the fun began.

"He's peeking!" cried Walter, "so he can be sure to catch Rose."

"I'm not peeking. Honest _Injun_!" declared Uncle John, exactly as he had heard the boys say it.

"Catch _me_!" cried Leslie, at the same time dodging him, and he grasped empty air.

"And _me_!" cried Lena, just behind him, springing past him as he turned.

Sprite made no sound as she tried to pass him, but was just a bit too slow, and he caught her.

"Ah, I know who I've found!" he cried, "because no other little girl but Sprite has such long, silken braids."

He lifted the handkerchief, and laughed to see her blushing cheeks.

It was now Sprite's turn. Slowly she advanced, her pretty hands outstretched, and oddly enough she at once caught Lena Lindsey. Her little face was puzzled, and earnest, as she felt of the hair, the cap, and the gown. Then, in an instant, she passed her slender fingers over the chin.

She laughed merrily.

"It's Lena!" she cried gaily, "for it is Lena who has a deep dimple in her chin!"

Each took his turn at being blindfolded, and then "Post office" was announced.

Polly received a great batch of letters, and it was Rob, of course, who "_mailed_" them. Polly sent five "letters" to Rose, Rose had ten for Uncle John, Uncle John had two for Aunt Judith, who protested that she was "not a child."

"Neither am I," he said.

Aunt Judith chose little Sprite, then Sprite chose Harry Grafton. Harry had five letters for Polly, and Polly had one for Walter, who declared that he _found two_!

"Copenhagen" was the next, and "Pillow" was the next.

Princess Polly, Rose and Sprite were the most favored of all the little lassies, and it would have been hard to say which of the three was the most popular.

They were now a bit tired, and while they were resting, Aunt Judith told a long story of a most exciting sleighing party that she once experienced, when the horses became frightened, and went plunging over the snow covered fields, having left the roadway far behind.

Then Uncle John matched it with a vivid tale of an encounter with a vessel manned by ocean outlaws. The children held their breath, and they felt very warm and cosy and secure, as they sat watching the dancing flames, and listening to tales of adventure.

"Now let us all enjoy a simple, old-time treat," said Aunt Judith. She tapped a tiny silver bell, and the pretty maid in her striped gown and kerchief appeared with a tray on which were little sandwiches cut in fancy shapes, and filled with chicken, others filled with lettuce, and yet others with chopped nuts. Gyp did not dream that nuts were ever served thus.

There were plates of dainty cakes, and tiny wine glasses filled to the brim with delicious raspberry shrub. How the children enjoyed the simple treat!

The sandwiches and cakes disappeared like magic, and the wee wine glasses were filled again and again with the spiced raspberry juice.

Greta piled her tray with an extra supply, and returned to the parlor, where the children were chattering like sparrows while they enjoyed the treat.

"I think this is a lovely party," said Princess Polly.

"So do I!" cried the others, as if with one voice.

"I think these are the nicest boys and girls I ever met," said Walter, adding, "especially the girls."

His merry gray eyes were laughing, and Uncle John said, as he looked at the eager, boyish face:

"You shall come often to my home here at Avondale, and become even better acquainted with my young friends, and neighbors."

"I'd like to, sir," Walter replied, "for I want them to be my friends."

"We will! We will!" cried an eager chorus.

It was later than they dreamed when the clock chimed the hour, and they took leave of Aunt Judith telling her how quaint and delightful the party had been, and how truly they had enjoyed the evening. Captain Atherton took the entire party under his protection, and they walked home together, talking all the way of the kindness of Aunt Judith in planning the pleasure for them.

Very early next morning an impish figure sat astride the old wooden pump that stood near the door of the cottage.

He seemed to have no interest in anything save that door, and he sat very still, his eyes riveted upon it.

The old pump had not been used in years, but it served for a fine pedestal for Gyp.

At last he heard the key turn in the lock, and he was all attention.

The little maid opened it, and took in the milk jar.

"Where's _her_?" he demanded. "I want ter see _her_!"

Greta nodded, and ran in to call Aunt Judith.

"There's the queerest looking boy sitting out on top of the old wooden pump, and he says he wants to see you," said Greta.

Half guessing who it was, for what other boy would make an early morning call, and choose so odd a seat while he waited, Aunt Judith went to the door, and looked out.

"Did you wish to see me?" she asked with a pleasant smile, but Gyp had apparently forgotten what he had intended to say.

"The nuts were fine," Aunt Judith said, "and I want to thank you for them."

"_That's_ what I came fer. I wanted ter know if them nuts was any good?"

"They were very nice indeed, and Gyp, I'll give you something that will show you just what I did with them. Wait a moment."

Gyp waited, wondering if he had quite understood her. Who had ever given him anything?

Aunt Judith came to the door with a plate of sandwiches.

"There, Gyp," she said, "those sandwiches on that side of the plate are chicken but these on this side are filled with some of your nuts."

"Oh, who ever heard of bread stuffed with nuts!" he cried. "They're great!" he cried a moment later, "but I don't want the plate. We take what we eat in our hands at home."

He suited the action to the words, for although the sandwiches were small, he managed to grasp one with both hands, demonstrating that it could be done.

"That was a kind little note that you sent with the bag of nuts," Aunt Judith said, "and since you've promised to be my friend, Gyp, I promise to be yours."

"All right!" cried Gyp, "when does it begin?"

"What?" she asked in surprise.

"Why, us bein' friends," said Gyp.

"Now-, Gyp, my boy. Now!" said Aunt Judith. "Come in and we'll talk it over."

"Oo-o-o! Not now!" cried Gyp, "but to-night, if I dares ter, I'll dress up, and come."

He slid down from the tall old wooden pump, gave three wild hops, and then raced off across the field toward the old shed-like building that he called home.

She watched his flying figure from the doorway, and as he disappeared behind a clump of bushes, she turned, and closed the door.

"Strange, wild little fellow!" she said. "I wonder if he'll come!" And when night came, she found herself listening for the sound of a quick step.

At last it came, and quickly Aunt Judith opened the door. Gyp walked in very meekly, and sat on the edge of a chair seat, his old hat in his hands. His hair was painfully smooth, and he wore a bright striped shirt, an old red tie, and while his suit could hardly be called "dressy," it certainly showed that the boy had brushed it, and that he had tried to improve his appearance.

At school he had learned that he must remove his hat when he entered a room, a fact that had greatly surprised him, but he had remembered it.

Aunt Judith felt that she must work carefully, lest Gyp be seized with fear, and bolt for the door, and freedom.

Gently she told him how, by doing his best, he would find friends who would deal kindly with him. That he might have friends if he chose, and that he could, by good behavior, force them to respect him.

"I will be your friend," she said, "and Gyp, let me prove it. Rose tells me that you find your lessons hard to master. Bring them to me evenings, and I will help you with them. You may come Wednesday, and Saturday evenings, and perhaps you can win promotion, so as to climb steadily up to a class of your own age."

"Do you think I could?" he asked. "Would they let me?"

"Make them do it, Gyp. You're smart enough. Come! What do you say? Let's try," Aunt Judith said.

"I'll do it," he said, "and if you help me, maybe I can get out of that class. They laugh at me, and it makes me mad to be called 'baby.'"

"Come over here with your books Saturday evening, and we'll see what we two can do," was the earnest reply.

CHAPTER VIII

GYP'S AMBITION

Gyp sauntered along on the way to school, a thoughtful expression making his face less reckless than usual.

"Looks 's if 'twould pay ter be decent," he said, half aloud.

He was very quiet, and the teacher questioned if he were planning mischief. The little pupils watched him, and wondered when his restlessness would begin.

His teacher wondered, too, but Gyp kept his eyes on his book, and appeared not to know that he was being watched.

For the first time since he had been forced to attend school, he had a perfect spelling lesson.

He stumbled over every long word in the reading lesson, however, and the problems in arithmetic puzzled him completely.

If the arithmetic had seemed easier he might not have appealed so promptly to Aunt Judith for aid, but the young teacher was unable to make it clear to him, and when evening came, he raced across the fields, his book under his arm, and tapped at her door.

"Ah, you've come, Gyp!" she said, smiling at him encouragingly, "I hoped you would."

"You said Wednesday and Saturday, an' this is only Tuesday, but I can't get my lesson for termorrer 'less someone helps me," he said.

"There is no reason why you may not stay to-night," Aunt Judith said, kindly, "and now tell me what it was that made the arithmetic so hard today."

"She asked me if I had ten pears, and I wanted to keep one for myself, and divide the others between two of my friends, how many would I give each, and I told her I'd keep more than one for myself, and I didn't know two _anybodies_. I'd want to give the others to, and then they all laughed. I don't see why."

Aunt Judith was trying not to laugh as heartily as the little pupils whose merriment had so annoyed Gyp.

"And the next thing she asked was about dividing pears, too. Don't folks divide anything but _pears-? They don't in the arithmetic!"

"Oh, Gyp, Gyp!" cried Aunt Judith, and the puzzled boy laughed with her, because he could not help it.

He did not mind her laughter. Indeed, he already felt better acquainted with her, because they had laughed together. The laughter of the little pupils had maddened him, but that was different.

"_They_ laughed _at_ me, but _you_ laugh _with_ me," he said, with quick understanding.

"And I'll _work_ with you, Gyp," was the pleasant answer, and the boy at once opened his book.

When Gyp took his cap and started for home, after two hours spent at the cottage, he had a better understanding of figures, and their use, and the actual worth of arithmetic, than he had obtained, thus far, in his daily attendance at school.

"Why, Gyp," Aunt Judith had said, in reply to his statement that he "didn't see any use for arithmetic," "you mustn't grow to manhood with no knowledge of arithmetic, or knowledge of figures, or how to reckon. When you go to work you will need this knowledge. There are few things that you can do that will not be easier, or better done, and perhaps

be better paid for if you are 'quick at figures.' You must not always live like a gypsy. You must learn all you can while you are at school, and then you must work, and earn, and try to be a good, and useful man. You can, I know, if you try."

Gyp thought of Aunt Judith's words as he lay on his rude bed that night.

"She said I needn't always live like a gypsy," he murmured. "She said I could learn, and then some time I could earn."

He lay a long time, wide awake, repeating Aunt Judith's words of cheer, and each time that he whispered them, he grew braver, and more determined.

"They've always said, 'Oh, he's only a gypsy,' but I'll learn, and I'll earn, and I'll do something. I don't know what, but I'll do something, see 'f I don't!"

There was no one to dispute his statement, and he dropped to sleep, and dreamed of doing great deeds.

Ever since he could remember, he had heard the boys of Avondale speak as if he were a gypsy, and as if that fact explained every bit of mischief that he did. He had always felt that, being a gypsy, there was no chance for him in any walk of life, and that, therefore, there was simply no use to try.

Now a new light had dawned, and with it came hope, cheer, determination, to succeed.

"I'll do it," he murmured in his sleep.

Soon it was whispered that Gyp was working hard at school for promotion, and when he took his place in a class higher, he held his head high, and bravely worked at his lessons. Aunt Judith stood by him, and Wednesday and Saturday evenings, rain or shine, he spent at her little home, working with all his might to improve.

In the middle of the term, because of extra work that he had done under her instruction, he was again promoted.

He was steadily "catching up" with the boys of his own age. Those boys had now ceased to laugh at Gyp. He was winning their respect.

Sprite Seaford was another pupil who was working faithfully. She knew that her dear father and mother had made a great sacrifice when they had decided to live through the Fall, the Winter and, the Spring in

the old house on the shore, without the little daughter, whose face was like sunshine, whose voice was music in the home.

There were times when Sprite was homesick, but those were the rare occasions when she chanced to be alone. Just now she was very happy. The weather was mild. All snow had vanished beneath the warm rays of the sun, and she ran out to know if it were really as warm as it looked. The tall evergreen trees and hedges shone dark against the sky, and Sprite stood looking at them. She had taken part in a little play on the week before, and some of the lines now flitted through her mind, and she lifted her pretty arms in graceful gesture. With the dark trees and low shrubbery behind her, she recited the lines with appropriate gesture, and telling effect.

Six small girls had taken part in the little play, and each had been chosen by Miss Kenyon, because of her talent for speaking. Sprite, with her long, golden hair, and her slender figure, had been cast for the fairy queen, whose delight it was to grant the wishes of all good children.

Now she stepped out into an open space, the beautiful garden making a lovely background for her figure. Gracefully she stood as she recited a verse that had been a part of the fairy play.

"If you're striving to excel,
And your very best you do,
You shall be rewarded well;
I will make your wish come true."

A dark figure crouched behind a clump of underbrush that the gardener had thought too pretty to cut down.

Through snow and ice the red leaves had clung to the little scrub oak, and now that a mild day had come, the leaves looked very bright as the sun lay on them.

The figure hiding there was Gyp, and his eyes grew brighter as he heard the little verse.

He stirred uneasily.

Sprite, believing herself to be alone, repeated the verse with even greater spirit than before, and as she spoke the last line, Gyp sprang to his feet.

"I will make your wish come true," said Sprite, whereat Gyp sprang from his hiding-place, crying:

"Oh, _will_ yer? _Will_ yer? _Are_ ye a fairy? _Kin_ yer grant my wish?"

All the superstition of his race showed in his eager face.

Sprite seemed neither afraid nor startled, nor was she annoyed at the interruption. For, a second she looked in gentle surprise at the boy's dark, eager face.

Then a look of pity made her eyes very soft.

"Oh, Gyp!" she cried, "what is the wish you want granted? I'm not a fairy, so of course I can't grant it, but,—Oh, Gyp! I'm awfully sorry. Tell me what the wish is! Sometimes it helps to tell."

Pityingly, and more like a little woman than like the child that she was, she spoke to comfort him.

For a moment he felt abashed that he had so plainly shown the longing in his heart, then as she asked again, he cried:

"I want to be _someone_. I want a chance to be _something_ besides Gyp, the gypsy boy."

"Oh, then that's almost granted _now_!" she cried in quick relief, "because I heard the teacher say, the other day:

"That boy will get there! That boy will be someone worth while, and I mean to help him."

"Did she say _that_?" cried Gyp, his eyes showing how little he dreamed that the work that he was doing was being noticed.

"She truly did," said Sprite, "so while I couldn't grant your wish, I _could_ tell you that it would come true, and I'm glad of that."

"So'm I," agreed Gyp, "but don't yer tell any of the others that I thought yer was a fairy, will yer?"

She promised faithfully, and when he had thanked her for what she had told him, and for the promise that she had just made, he turned and, as usual, ran off to the woods.

Sprite stood watching him as he ran, like the wind across the fields, and even as she looked he turned, paused a moment, and waved his hand to the little waiting figure.

Quickly she lifted hers, and returned his salute.

He stood just a second, waved his hand again, and then plunged into the thicket.

When he entered the old shack that he called "home," he found his mother stirring a steaming mass that nearly filled the huge iron kettle that stood on the rusty stove.

His small brothers and sisters formed a half circle around her, watching every movement that helped to prepare the dinner. They were all much younger than Gyp, and only one, a girl, was yet of school age.

"They'll be comin' after yer ter make me let ye go ter school same's Gyp," the woman was saying, as the boy opened the door, "but I need ye ter home this Winter ter help me, sure's my name is Gifford."

"Is_ yer name Gifford?" Gyp asked in surprise.

"Of course 'tis, Gyp. Why d'ye ask? Ain't ye never heard that before?" she asked, sharply.

"Never heard us folks called anything but gypsies," he replied.

"Well, how could ye? Don't no one never come here," his mother said, with fearful disregard of grammar.

"Then why isn't _my_ name Gifford, too?" he persisted.

"Wal, _'tis_. Ye was named John, John Gifford, but ye couldn't seem ter say that in yer baby days, so ye left off the 'John,' and called, 'Gifford,' 'Gyp,' an' 'Gyp' it has been ever since. Don't they call ye that at school? I told the ol' feller what come ter say ye must 'tend school that that was yer name."

Gyp did not reply.

He thought best to be silent, and picking up one of his books, he studied until dinner was ready.

No time was wasted in serving. A very small low table was dragged to the center of the floor, the kettle was placed upon it, and then, a hungry circle, they swarmed around it.

The soup was very hot, but each was provided with a long slice of bread, and these they dipped into the soup, blowing it for a moment, and then eating it ravenously.

Gyp ate, as the others did. What else could he do? He had caught glimpses, now and then, of a better way of living, and in his heart he thought;

"I will not always live like a gypsy."

His teacher had called him "Gyp" as others did.

The next day, he appeared very early at school, and astonished her by asking shyly if she would call him, by his name, "John."

"Certainly, if you wish it," she said.

"I thought you liked to be called Gyp, and would feel more at home if I called you that."

"That's _just_ it!" he cried, in quick anger, "I _would_ 'feel at home' with that old name, but I don't want to '_feel at home_.' I'll not _always_ live like a gypsy, and I want a decent name, like other boys!"

"That's _right_, Gyp, no _John_!" she said, and both smiled to see how difficult it was to remember the new name.

"You can be so good and useful that every man, woman and child in Avondale will be forced to respect the name of John Gifford. I will speak of this to the pupils, and now that they all see how hard you are trying to gain knowledge, I think they will be willing to call you by the name that is really yours. Remember this, however. Don't be offended if sometimes we forget, and call you 'Gyp.' It may mean only that we remember the boy who, while still thus addressed, made persistent effort to improve."

There was great excitement one Wednesday morning when dainty invitations were received by all the boys and girls who usually played together, requesting the pleasure of their company two weeks from that night, at the home of John Atherton.

"Festivities to commence at eight," was inscribed in gold letters at the bottom of the page.

"Oh, Rose, I ought not to ask," said Princess Polly, "and I won't ask _what_ the festivities are to be, but I'll ask you if you know?"

"Not the least thing," Rose replied, "and when I asked Uncle John, he only laughed, and said that was his little secret, so we'll have to wait 'til the night of the party to know what he has planned. The only thing that he has told me is that on the night of the party, Sprite is to remain at our house and that will be the first night of her visit with us."

"I know that," Princess Polly said, "because he told papa that the time for Sprite to be with him was close at hand, and papa said that

he knew that we had had our share of her visit, but she has been so sweet, so dear, that we'd never be ready to let her go."

"That's just the reason we want her, for truly, Princess Polly, next to you, Sprite is the sweetest girl I know. There's no girl quite so dear as you, Polly, but surely Sprite comes the very next," Rose said.

CHAPTER IX

A JOLLY TIME

Gwen Harcourt felt that in leaving school at Avondale, and entering a small private school in the next town she was really doing something quite fine.

To be sure, the little school was not much of a school. Rather it should have been called a private *class*, and the little pupils met at the home of a young woman who was far from well equipped for the task of directing their studies, or training their minds.

She had acquired a fair education, but so little governing power had she that the pupils did about as they chose, and that Gwen considered the most charming fact regarding the class.

She thought it very smart to go over to the station, walk up and down the platform waiting for the train, and then, seated in the car, offer her ticket to the conductor when he came down the aisle.

"The Avondale girls and boys just walk to school, but I have to take a train!" she said to herself one morning, as she hurried toward the station.

One might have thought it a *convenience* to live at a distance from the school. The next town was a mile from Avondale, and Gwen thought it very daring to take the trip alone.

"It makes me sick to listen when Gwen Harcourt is talking about going to school," said Rob. "She thinks it a great thing to ride a mile! If she had to ride twenty-five miles, she'd feel so big that Avondale would not be big enough to hold her."

Rob Lindsey had met Gwen near the station, and she had looked at him as sharply as if she had not seen him for a year.

"Do you *still* go to school at Avondale?" she asked.

"Why, yes," Rob said. "Did you think we commenced to stay at home when you left?"

"Well, I wouldn't go back there for anything!" declared Gwen. "My mamma calls me a very wonderful child, and when she told my new teacher that, she said to mamma; 'I know she's an unusual child. I can see that at a glance.'"

"Perhaps she'd call me wonderful if I engaged her to do so. I might tell her to just look at me and say if she'd give me a prize."

Lena laughed at Rob's disgust.

"I wonder if she will think any parties that are given at Avondale are too near to be interesting?" she said.

"I wouldn't risk inviting her if I didn't want her to accept," Rob replied as he picked up his books and turned toward the door.

"Oh, say, Lena!" he cried, "I just happened to think of Captain Atherton's party. Do you suppose Gwen is invited?"

"Why, Rob! What a question! Captain Atherton wouldn't slight any child in this neighborhood. Of course Gwen will be invited," Lena said.

"Then she'll be there," cried Rob. "She couldn't stay away."

Lena was a little late in preparing for school, and as she ran down the walk, she saw Leslie Grafton just ahead of her, hurrying down the avenue.

"Leslie!" she cried, and Leslie turned a laughing face toward her.

"Come on!" she cried, "I can't wait. Catch up with me, Lena. I want to ask you something."

Lena was swift footed, and soon they were running along together.

They were just in time to avoid being late, and as they entered, Leslie whispered:

"I'll ask the question at recess."

It happened that at recess, everyone was ready to ask the same question.

"Does anyone know what the 'festivities' are to be at Captain Atherton's party?"

That was the question that each asked the other, but while all asked the question, no one could answer it, and Harry Grafton laughed as he

said;

"We'll have to wait 'til the evening of the party, and we might as well wait patiently."

"Rose won't tell us," Lena said, reaching to give one of Rose's brown curls just a little "tweak."

"At first when you asked me, I said I didn't know," said Rose, "but now I'll have to say that I know all of Uncle John's plans for the party, but I won't tell."

"And Sprite knows something about it, for see! She's laughing now," said Rob.

"Like Rose I know, but won't tell," Sprite said.

"I won't tease then," said Princess Polly, "because they ought not to tell, and I don't really want them to. I'd like to know now, but I'd rather have it a surprise when the evening comes."

"Polly is right, as usual," said Rob Lindsey, to which Harry Grafton replied in a teasing voice:

"Does anyone believe that Rob would say that anything that Polly does is anything but right?"

"Quit teasing," cried Rob, "or I'll return the favor."

Harry at once became silent, and the others laughed, for it was well known that he admired Rose, and that he did not like to be teased.

On the evening of the party the little guests arrived promptly. "Festivities to commence at eight," the invitations had said, and there was not a boy or girl who cared to miss any of the pleasures offered.

Captain Atherton's new home was a blaze of light, and every room was decorated with a wealth of greenery, and glowing blossoms.

Mimic butterflies hovered among the flowers, and soft music sounded through the halls. Silvery bells were vying with the triangle in producing tinkling tones that chimed in sweet accord with the melody that the strings were playing.

At one end of the spacious parlor a tiny grove of palms and tall shrubs looked as if transplanted from out of doors.

Captain Atherton, tall and handsome, greeted his little friends gaily, and when all had arrived, he led them toward the grove.

"Wait here a moment," he said, "and see what happens. This is an enchanted grove, and a sweet enchantress is in hiding here.

"Come forth, oh lady fair,
Dear spirit of the air,
We long to see thy face,
Thy form of airy grace.
Some things we long to know
Thou well can'st tell, I trow."

For a moment not a sound save the soft music was heard. Then,—a rustling as of silken draperies, or like wind among the leaves, and the branches parted, and Iris Vandmere, radiant, smiling, extended her pretty hands in greeting. Clad in softest silk gauze in lilac, and ivory white, she suggested the blossom for which she was named. Like a fair iris bloom she appeared, diamonds on her neck and in her hair representing dewdrops.

"Dearest friends, I heard you call,
I have come to greet you all.
I am now your fairy queen,
And, beneath these branches green,
I will grant, to each of you
That your dearest wish come true."

"Oh-o-o-o!" came like a sigh of delight from the excited children as they gazed at the lovely figure.

Each had a wish, and wisely she answered, for Iris was as quick witted as she was beautiful.

"I wish I could make everyone happy," said Princess Polly.

"Be as loving and kind as I am told you now are, and your wish will come true," said Queen Iris.

"I'd like to do something _very_ nice for father and mother that would be a sweet surprise," said Sprite. "I _wish_ I knew what to do."

"Your wish is granted," said Iris. She wrote a few words on a slip of pink paper.

"Look at this to-morrow morning and you will know just what to do," she said as she placed the tiny folded paper in Sprite's hand.

In the same sweet manner Iris contrived to grant the wishes of all.

Gwen held back.

"Have you no wish?" Iris asked kindly, and Gwen hesitated, then she said;

"_Yes_. I want to be admired _all_ the time and _everywhere_."

Iris looked searchingly at the pretty, but pert face. Then she said;

"Be kind, be good, be sweet, be true, and all the world shall smile on you."

"Oh, I don't mean _that_ way!" said Gwen in disgust.

"If you do as I tell you, you will be beautiful," said Iris.

"Why, I'm beautiful _now_! My mamma says so!" cried Gwen. The children stared in amazement at the child who could make such a silly speech.

For a second no one spoke. To relieve the situation, Captain Atherton spoke.

"I think Queen Iris has granted your wishes most wisely. Now, let me present to you the little Goddess of Plenty."

He drew aside a brocade hanging and disclosed a huge half blown rose.

Its large petals commenced to open, and from its center sprang Rose Atherton, a "horn of plenty" in her hands, filled with bonbons. Laughing gaily, she lifted her hands filled with bonbons and tossed them into the center of the room.

Many of them were caught, so that few fell to the floor. Wrapped in tinsel, they shone like stars as they caught the light, and the boys and girls vied with each other, laughing as they tried to see which would be lucky, and secure the largest number.

When the gilded horn was empty, Rose ran to where a giant scallop shell was standing. It was formed of papier-mache, and decorated to look like the texture of a shell.

"Guess what's in this!" she said, looking over her shoulder to laugh at them.

"Oh, is it Sprite?" Princess Polly asked eagerly. "You were in the big rose. Is Sprite in the beautiful shell?"

Rose lightly touched the top edge of the shell.

It opened wide, and there, sure enough sat Sprite all clad in soft flesh pink gauze and coral, coral everywhere.

Strings of coral beads held her golden hair in place, hung from her neck and arms, encircled her slender waist.

She extended her arms, and then as the musicians played a little prelude, she commenced to sing.

"I've lovely gifts for my dearest friends
I've something for each of you,
I've coral beads for the girls so fair,
I've scarfpins, dear boys, for you.
And always we will remember this,
That a gift has a value true,
But better far, than the finest gift
Is the love that we give to you."

"Oh, Sprite, dear Sprite!" they cried, as they thronged around her to accept the beautiful coral. The girls gaily clasped the necklaces, and quite as eagerly, the boys accepted the pretty scarf pins.

"Now, we'll have some magic!" Captain Atherton said, "and let us all be seated here at this end of the parlor."

Quickly they turned to do as he said, and to their surprise, they found that while Iris, and Rose, and Sprite had been entertaining them, the housekeeper had arranged the seats in rows, as if at a private theatre.

They were soon seated, the musicians began to play some merry music, and then two slender nimble fellows, all silk tights, and spangles, ran in and began to balance great gilded balls on the tips of tiny wands.

Then they spun plates on those same slender wands, they brought a huge globe, and walked upon it, rolling it, by treading it, quite across that end of the room. They did clever tricks that made the children laugh, and at last, they rolled themselves up like balls, and rolled right out of the room!

The children cheered, and generously applauded, whereupon the two performers came back and repeated the last part of their act.

The housekeeper now appeared, gowned in black silk, with a fine white muslin cap, and apron.

"Will all these little friends, led by Captain Atherton, and Miss Vandmere, march out to the dining-room for refreshments?" she asked, and the eager little friends waited for no urging. A spread had been prepared especially suitable for a cold, wintry night, and how they did enjoy it!

Hot chicken boullion, wee, hot chicken pies in the dearest little round

nappies, ice cream in lovely shapes, and hot chocolate with whipped cream. Oh, but nothing could have been chosen that would have been so delicious for a treat to be enjoyed on a frosty evening!

"Let us crack this huge nut," said Captain Atherton, and suiting the action to the word, he hit the big nut that lay upon a salver in the center of the table.

With a "crack" like a toy pistol it opened, proving itself to be filled with nuts of the usual size.

Then what fun they had trying to open their nuts! Some were chocolate nuts, with nut meats inside, while others were real nut shells filled with bonbons.

After the good things had been enjoyed, they hastened back to the large drawing-room, where they danced to the merry music.

It was an evening of fun and frolic, and when, in the midst of their fun, they noticed that bright, handsome Uncle John Atherton was dancing with Miss Iris Vandmere, they slyly formed a laughing ring around them and danced, and sang to their hearts' content.

It had been a bright, merry evening, and when the boys and girls told Captain Atherton how he had delighted them, he said, heartily:

"I have been very happy this evening, and if it is possible that you have been even half as happy as I have been, I shall feel well repaid for having given this party."

Lessons were rather neglected next morning, for who could enjoy such an evening of rare delight, and so soon forget to think of its many pleasures? More than once the teacher had to speak rather sharply because she realized that their minds were upon something that had nothing to do with their lessons.

Many were the notes that were written, and exchanged, and when, at last, school was out, they walked along the avenue, their arms about each other's waists, and all the way they talked about the party of the night before.

"Oh, Sprite! You did your part well!" said Harry Grafton.

"And you looked just like a sea fairy!" said Lena Lindsey.

"I mean always to keep my lovely necklace," said Princess Polly, "and let's every one of us keep the pretty coral gifts to help us to remember

the fine party that we so enjoyed.”

”We’d never forget it,” said Leslie, ”but we’ll all want to keep the dainty corals.”

”And wasn’t Miss Vandmere beautiful when she came to grant our wishes?” Rose asked. ”Already I love her.”

”_Already_?” Rob said, and his voice bespoke a question.

”Why, yes,” Rose said, ”already.”

”That sounds odd, and queer,” objected Gwen. ”Why don’t you tell us just what you mean?” but Rose chose not to reply.

She only laughed and shook her head.

CHAPTER X

A HOLIDAY PARTY

Sprite could not wait to dress on the morning after the party. Softly she crept across the floor to the chair over which she had hung her frock.

From the folds of its girdle she drew the tinted paper, and opening it she read: ”Captain Atherton is to offer a prize to the boy or girl who has highest rank at Christmas time. Try for it, and I believe that you will obtain it. Will not that delight your dear father and mother?”

”I _will_ try!” she whispered, ”and oh, if it is possible, I’ll get it, just to repay them for letting me have this lovely Winter. I wonder if it is to be a medal!”

It was her first morning at the home of John Atherton, and as she looked around the pretty chamber, she knew that she could be very happy there.

She had enjoyed her stay at Sherwood Hall.

Now commenced another visit with dear Rose Atherton as her companion, and Sprite wondered why such great good fortune had been given her.

Once she had been a dear little lass by the sea, with two loving parents, but no playmates. Now, she had Princess Polly, and Rose, beside ever so many little schoolmates, and she was being cared for

by Mr. and Mrs. Sherwood, and Captain Atherton, who had asked her to call him, "Uncle John."

"I'm having so much pleasure," she whispered, "that I want to send some down to the 'Mermaid's Cave.' I'll begin to-day to work for the prize!"

She seemed unusually quiet at breakfast, and Uncle John wondered if she were tired from the excitement of the night before, or if she were a bit homesick.

Gently he questioned her, and she laughed so gaily that at once his fears were allayed.

"I'm not tired, and not a bit homesick," she said, "but I've been thinking that I mustn't waste one single minute before Christmas. I mean to win that prize, and to do that I'll have to work very hard."

"Why, Sprite!" cried Rose, "you've been working hard ever since school opened."

"I have," she said quietly, "but I'll have to work harder still, and I'm willing to, if I have to work day and evening."

"Oh, Uncle John!" cried Rose, "she won't have to do that. Her lessons are almost perfect now. A little more study, and she will easily be at the head of the class."

It was announced that day at school that Captain John Atherton had offered a prize for the best average, and Sprite gasped when the teacher said;

"The prize is well worth working for. It is a large prize for any boy or girl to win. It is fifty dollars in gold! Now work for it! You will all gain by trying, for while but one can win the prize, every scholar who works for it, has higher scholarship, and has acquired more knowledge than if he had not entered the competition."

The pupils were greatly interested, and it was evident that many intended to strive for the prize. Harry Grafton, on the way home from school, turned quickly to look at Rob as he asked;

"What's Gwen Harcourt doing these days?"

"I've no idea," Rob answered in a careless manner, and if he had spoken his thoughts, he would have said that he did not greatly care.

"Well, she's not going to school, and what is queerer than that, she isn't coming over here to tell us all about it," Harry said.

There were other matters of greater interest to be talked of, and the two boys soon forgot Gwen.

Gwen Harcourt never allowed herself to be long forgotten, and one bright afternoon, she decided to run off by herself and have a little fun of the kind that she liked best.

She stopped first at Aunt Judith's cottage.

She could not have told why she chose first to call there. Aunt Judith and the little maid had gone down to the parsonage for a call, and Gwen knocked until she was tired, then paused on the step, trying to decide where next she would call.

"Stupid that everyone is in school, and won't be out for an hour!" she said.

Then her eyes brightened.

"I know where I'll go!" she cried.

She turned from the avenue into a pretty street, and ran along until she reached a house that set a little farther back than the others.

"There's a lady who lives here who looks pleasant, and I've always meant to see the inside of her house," thought Gwen. "I can stay a little while there, and be just in time to meet the other girls when they come out of school."

She rang the bell.

No one came to the door. After waiting a few moments she rang again.

Again she waited, listening for approaching footsteps. Then she stooped, and tried to peep through the keyhole. She turned, a crafty light in her eyes, and she nodded until her curls danced as she softly said;

"What if the door isn't locked? And what if I should walk right in, and sit down? What would happen?"

She looked elfish as she asked the questions, a smile parting her lips.

Carefully she turned the knob and then, a gentle push opened the door, and on tiptoe, she entered, making her way along the hall to a room where the sunlight streamed across the floor.

The hall had been dark, and coming suddenly upon the broad band of sunlight, Gwen was almost blinded, and for a few seconds, she did not see other objects in the room. A chair stood near the door, and she climbed upon it, squirming around, and sitting down as if it were

exactly what she had come intending to do.

She wondered why the house was so still.

She also wondered where the pleasant faced lady was. She felt strangely nervous, and a bit afraid.

She could not have told why she felt afraid to move, and so sat absolutely still. Her eyes roved from one object to another, first looking at the pictures on the wall, then the ornaments upon the mantel, then the lamp upon the table just before her, then,—

Between the lamp, and a tall vase that stood near it, a pair of eyes were looking sharply at her.

Gwen clutched the arms of her chair, caught her breath in terror, and then screamed.

”Strange that I can’t read without being interrupted by a child who knows no better than to poke her impudent little nose in here, uninvited!”

The voice low and angry made her tremble with fear, and she slid from the chair, raced out through the hall, ran down the street, never once looked behind her.

”I won’t _ever_ go _anywhere_ again, unless somebody asks me to,” she said to herself. Who that ever had known Gwen would believe that she could refrain from doing just the same thing, the first time that her curiosity prompted her? She had been frightened, and, for the moment, would have promised anything.

The man, a studious, quiet man, with an unpleasant disposition, had been annoyed when Gwen had interrupted his reading.

Knowing little of children, he had not dreamed that he would frighten her, and when she ran out, he simply turned another page, and continued reading.

He had wished her to fully realize that she was an intruder, and when she turned and ran, he felt that she understood.

The first person that she met was the private teacher who, for the past few weeks had been endeavoring to have at least a few hours each day devoted study.

Gwen had refused to look at a lesson book in the forenoon, and when afternoon had arrived, she had left the house to escape instruction.

"Miss Gwen, I've been looking everywhere for you, and your mamma is really quite nervous, because you've been gone so long. Where have you been?" the young woman asked.

"I don't have to tell you," Gwen replied rudely, "but I will because I want to. I made some calls, and the last one was funny, and queer too. I was frightened some-, and I ran out of the house where a cross man just shouted at me!"

"Was he a neighbor?" the teacher asked, looking curiously at Gwen.

"Of course not," cried Gwen. "What fun would it be to call on neighbors? I'd rather go to houses where I don't know the people, just for the sake of seeing what they look like, and how their houses look."

The young teacher was not surprised. That very morning, soon after breakfast, upon returning to her room, she had found Gwen on her knees searching her trunk. Gwen had neither blushed, nor looked abashed.

"I wanted to know how many dresses you brought with you," she had said coolly, "and I don't see but one in the closet, two in this trunk, and one you have on. Is that all you have?"

Mrs. Harcourt passing the door, looked in to smile at Gwen.

"You mustn't mind if my little daughter examines your belongings in your trunks or bureau drawers. She's only deeply interested in you," she said.

The young governess felt like saying that she did not enjoy the sort of interest that made a child feel free to handle and examine the property of others, but she said nothing.

She knew that Mrs. Harcourt considered Gwen faultless.

Weeks had passed since the little pupils had commenced to strive to win the prize. Now there was great excitement. At the end of the afternoon session the name of the winner was to be announced, and in the evening the Holiday party at Sherwood Hall was to be enjoyed.

Of all the boys and girls at school, Sprite Seaford was surely the most restless.

At one time her cheeks would be hot, and soon after the color would leave them.

She had worked very, very hard to win the prize.

Oh, whose was it to be?

She clasped, and unclasped her nervous hands.

And when at last the teacher went to the board just back of her desk and wrote:

"Sprite Seaford, Prize winner," Sprite leaned back in her seat, pale, and almost breathless. For a moment not a sound broke the silence.

Sprite stared at the written words as if half stunned with surprise.

"Three cheers for Sprite Seaford!" shouted Rob Lindsey, forgetting that he was in school, and the teacher laughed outright.

"Give them, every one of you," she cried, and they gave them with a will.

Evening had come, starlight, moonlight in the great garden at Sherwood Hall, and a blaze of light indoors, where little feet kept time to sweet music, and sweeter voices laughed and talked in merry mood.

Princess Polly in white with silver spangles, a silver bandeau holding her powdered curls in place, looked like a little lady of the time of Watteau.

Faces and forms were different in character, but the costumes were similar, because Mrs. Sherwood had asked both boys and girls to come clad in white, with powdered hair.

It was a Holiday party, and the white costumes suggested the snowy season.

The walls were hung with holly and mistletoe, and the wreaths and garlands were tied with scarlet ribbons, while portieres and hangings were of scarlet brocade.

Rosy cheeks and red lips looked well with the powdered hair, and bright eyes twinkled beneath snowy bangs.

A slender figure dressed in the gaudy colors of a court jester, skipped here and there between the dancers making comical jokes, while he tossed, and nimbly caught a bright colored ball.

Still they danced to merry measures, and from behind a damask curtain came a slender girl in hues as bright as that of the jester.

A basket of beautiful flowers hung from her arm, and these she offered to the little guests.

The boys placed them in their buttonholes, and the girls tucked the roses and lilies in their girdles.

Hark! A flourish of silvery trumpets announced the arrival of some great personage!

Another long, sweet note, and there strode into the room a tall figure in crimson velvet and white fur, with snowy beard, and kindly face, across whose breast gold letters bespoke his name:

"King Christmas."

A great pack was on his back, which when opened, gave forth beautiful gifts for all.

There were bangles for the girls, there were rings, or silver pencils for the boys, and a kindly word he spoke to each as he presented the gift.

"Now here's a little purse of fifty gold dollars for the little lass who won it by faithful study, and the giver permits me to present it. Come, little lass, and take it, for now it belongs to you."

Sprite ran to him, as he stood waiting.

"Oh, I know you, King Christmas! You are good, kind Uncle John! I know your pleasant voice that I've learned to love so well!" she said.

"Even as I love you, dear child," he cried, placing a strong arm around her slender little form, while with the other hand he tore off the beard that so disguised him.

"I am King Christmas," he said, laughing gaily as he pointed proudly to the golden letters on his breast.

"Also Baron Goodfellow!" said Mr. Sherwood. "That name fits you just as well."

"Prince Give Give wouldn't be half bad," said Rob Lindsey, "for he's wild to give somebody something, all the time."

"Everyone in this house to-night is dear," said Sprite.

"Including you, Sprite Seaford," said Rose, and little Sprite felt that she had never been so happy.

There were merry games, and then refreshments, and then more games in which the elders joined, and when "good nights" were said, the guests turned homeward with happy hearts.

The moonlight shimmered on the snow, and glittered on the pendant icicles, and the keen, frosty air proved it to be true Holiday weather.

Jingling sleigh bells, tooting auto horns, voices talking, and laughing at the same time told of a gay evening that all had enjoyed.

They would dream of the party that night, and talk of it on the morrow.

There was one thing that no one thought of until some time after the party, and it was Leslie who spoke of it, to Rose and Princess Polly.

"Only think!" she said, "Mrs. Harcourt has had three different teachers for Gwen this Winter, because Gwen has acted so that the first and second left, and Gwen said yesterday that the one they have now is to leave next Monday."

"Why does she act so horrid?" said Rose.

"I'll tell you one nice thing about Gwen," said Princess Polly, "and that is that she didn't do one single thing at my party that wasn't nice."

"Why, truly she didn't!" cried Rose and Sprite together.

CHAPTER XI

UNCLE JOHN MAKES A PROMISE

Rain or shine, every Wednesday and Saturday evening found Gyp at the table in the sitting-room at Aunt Judith's cottage, bending over his books.

Aunt Judith, busy with a bit of needlework, looked often at the boy as he bent eagerly over his book, and marvelled that this was the same boy who less than a year ago was a trial to every owner of a garden or orchard.

A puzzled frown puckered his forehead one evening as he worked.

"What is it?" she asked. "Can I help you?"

"Maybe I'll have to let you, but I think I can do it. I'd like to

work it out if I can, and I'll try hard before I give up."

For a time he worked in silence, covering his slate with figures.

The clock ticked loudly on the mantel, and seemed to be trying to outdo Gyp's busy pencil.

"Scratch! Scratch!" went the pencil, and "Tick! Tick!" chirped the little clock, and then the boy looked up, his eyes bright with excitement.

"I've done it, Mrs. Aunt Judith!" he cried, "I've done it, and it's right! You said it was better for me to do everything that I could do, by studying and working, instead of being helped."

"It is better, because you will fully understand what you have done, and you will be more likely to remember it.

"But tell me," she said, laying her hand on his shoulder, "why do you call me Mrs. Aunt Judith?"

He looked frankly up into her face as he answered.

"You aren't my Aunt Judith, tho' I wish you were, so I think I ought to call you something beside the name, so I say Mrs. with it."

"Dear boy, you meant to be respectful," she said, "but you are such a good, hard working boy now that you shall call me 'Aunt Judith' just as the other children do."

He hesitated, and she understood.

"They shall not wonder why you do. I'll tell them that I asked you to," she said.

Without a word he picked up his books, took his old cap, and crossed the room.

Wondering that he did not speak she followed him.

At the door he turned, and looking up at her with eyes in which tears glistened he said:

"I'm going to work with all my might, and I mean to be a decent man, and then I'll do something for you,—Aunt Judith."

"Gyp, come back and let me thank you!" she cried when, after her surprise, she caught her breath, but a fit of his old shyness had come over him, and having said what was in his heart, he had at once raced off across the fields, and soon was out of sight or hearing in the

dark woods.

Aunt Judith told Captain Atherton all about Gyp's ambition, of his hard work at school, and the evenings spent at the cottage.

"He is determined to get on, and he says that he will not always live like a gypsy.

"He declares that he will be a decent man," she said, "but will not people be so prejudiced that they will not care to employ him?" she asked.

"_No_!" cried the captain, "for I will set aside any notions that they may have by employing him _myself_.

"_I_ will trust him, and this very week I'll tell him so!"

It happened that he met the boy on his way from school.

"How go the lessons, boy?" he asked kindly.

For some reason Gyp was not afraid.

"This is Friday, and I've had every lesson perfect this week. I'm going over to tell Aunt Judith. _She'll_ be glad!"

"Don't you tell the folks at home?" queried Captain Atherton.

"They don't care much," Gyp said with downcast eyes. Then, as if to excuse their lack of interest, he said:

"I guess they don't understand why I'm _bound_ to study."

"_I_ understand, my boy, just why you are working so hard, and I'm proud of you! Come, and tell _me_ about the weeks like this, when things go smoothly, and come just as quickly if things, instead, go roughly. Let me help you over the hard places, Gyp, for when you are out of school _I'll_ employ you. Now, work hard at school, knowing that when you have completed the course you're to be employed by _me_."

"Oh, sir, I'll work for you with all my strength," cried the grateful boy. "You _believe_ in me, you _trust_ me, and I'll be _true_!"

"I know you will, Gyp," said Captain Atherton, almost as greatly moved as Gyp himself.

When he reached the cottage, he was almost breathless, so swiftly had he run.

He dropped upon a chair near the door, and told first of the week's work at school, and then of the promise that Captain Atherton had made.

Neither Aunt Judith nor the genial captain knew how close was the tie that bound Gyp to be faithful to them. They had befriended him, and for that he was grateful. They believed in him, and that gave him courage to make persistent effort, but deep in his heart lay the memory of the first kind, caressing words that had ever been said to him.

"She sometimes says 'Dear boy' to me, and he said, 'My boy,'" he would often whisper to himself.

Gyp was now very happy. He was doing good work at school, he had won the respect of teacher and pupils.

Now Aunt Judith was interested in him, Captain Atherton believed in him, and oh, pleasant promise, the kindly captain would prove his faith by employing him!

"Folks in Avondale will have to think I'm something more decent than a gypsy!" he said.

The days were growing longer, the warm sun had chased away the last bit of ice, and now the fields were green, and the trees and shrubs were showing fine foliage.

In the gardens the early blossoms made soft color that told how soon the summer would appear.

Princess Polly sat waiting for Rose, and Sprite.

The soft breeze stirred the leaves, making them rustle as if they were whispering to each other the great news that summer would soon reach Avondale.

Polly turned to look toward the avenue. They were not in sight.

"I might walk over to call for them," she thought.

Then she remembered that she had promised to wait at a spot where they had often met, and from which they were now to set out for a walk.

"Why don't they come?" she said aloud.

A long time she sat waiting for her playmates to appear. At last a shout made her turn.

"Did you think we were never coming?" cried Rose.

"Oh, she must have thought just that," said Sprite, "so tell her what it was that kept us."

"Polly has been waiting so long, we'll start for our walk, and I'll tell the news as we go along," said Rose.

"Then let's hurry," said Polly, "because I'm wild to know what it was."

The three little friends tramped along the path that was always their favorite for a walk, and when they had reached a spot where a brook was spanned by a tiny bridge, they sat down to rest. It was then that Rose turned toward Polly.

"I'm not going to ask you to guess who was at our house, or why I could not meet you at two, as I promised, because you never could guess that, so I'll tell you. It was,—Great Aunt Rose!"

"Oh, Rose, why did she come?" Polly gasped. "Not to take you back with her!"

"That's just what I said, when I heard that she was in the parlor," said Sprite.

"Well, when I saw her carriage coming up the avenue," Rose said, "the shivers went up and down my back, but Uncle John, when he got up to go in to see her, stooped and whispered in my ear: 'Don't be frightened, little girl, for remember that you now belong to me, and I shall not easily give you up. Now, come in with me, dear. You know I can not refuse to let her see you.'

"So he took my hand, and we went in together.

"Great Aunt Rose sat stiff and prim in the center of the sofa.

"'How do you do, Aunt Rose?' I said, but she kept looking at me without speaking.

"'Doesn't Rose look as if the air at Avondale had done her a world of good?' Uncle John asked.

"'Really, John, I'm not sure,' Aunt Rose said, looking at me through her glasses, just as if I were a queer bug, or butterfly such as she'd never seen before. Uncle John looked vexed.

"'You certainly see that her cheeks are rosy, and she is rounder than when she first came to me,' he said.

"That's what I was thinking of," she said, "and when she was at our home, she was more delicate in her appearance. More slender, and pale, as an Atherton should be.

"No "Rose Atherton" ever was what country people call "buxom"! I'm not countrified!" I said, half expecting to be scolded, but Uncle John put his arm around me, and drew me closer as he said:

"Indeed you are not, unless fresh color, and dimples, mean countrified, when I should think the term a compliment." Then he turned to Great Aunt Rose.

"I have endeavored, ever since I have had little Rose under my care, to keep her much in the open air, and she has gained strength from sunshine and breeze," he said.

"I knew it! I knew it!" she said, springing from the sofa, and looking dreadfully excited, "and that is the reason for my call. You'll have her tanned with the sun, and her complexion ruined by the wind, and she'll look like anything but an Atherton by the time she's a young lady!

"You must let her return to the old Atherton house with me, and in its quiet, refining influence she will regain the delicate appearance that was so charming.

"Rose, will you come with me?"

"She put out her hand as if she meant to take me, whether I wanted to go with her or not, and for the moment I forgot that Uncle John was big enough, and brave enough, to keep me with him.

"I screamed, and ran from the room, and oh, I know it was rude, and I'm afraid unkind, but I didn't stop to think, and just kept on running until I found Sprite waiting for me at the gate."

"And she clasped my hand," said Sprite, continuing the story, "and she never told me a word of all this, but, instead, she said: 'Come quick! Oh, come quick!' and together we raced along until we met you, Polly.

"Wasn't it funny? Rose knew why we were running, but I didn't. I ran because she told me to, and I had to, to keep up with her!"

Princess Polly looked thoughtful. "You don't really believe she could make you live with her again, do you?" she asked.

"Oh, Rose, you haven't but just begun to live at Avondale!"

"Uncle John said she'd not easily get me away from him," Rose said, "and it may be that I needn't have been so frightened, but I feel

better out here, and I'll stay out until I know that she must have gone home. Come! We won't let it spoil our fun. We'll have a fine long walk, and when I get back, Great Aunt Rose will have surely gone."

One part of the road over which they walked was bordered on either side by white birches. Yet a bit farther willows took the place of birches, and there they left the road to cross the meadows, coming out into the bright sunlight.

The three little playmates had walked rapidly, and now began to slacken their pace, and when they reached a clump of trees, they sat down to enjoy the cool shade, and to talk for a while.

"You'll be happier, Rose, if we talk of something else," said Polly, "so I'll tell you that Sir Mortimer is strutting around our garden this morning with a new collar that I bought for him, and the big pink satin bow upon it is very becoming."

"And I'll tell a bit of news. I sent my prize right straight to the 'Mermaid's Cave,'" said Sprite, "and pa put it in the Cliffmore bank for me."

"Why, Sprite Seaford!" cried Rose. "How did you dare to send fifty dollars in gold?"

"Because," said Sprite, "I didn't send it by mail. I gave it to one of the very best men in this world, and that is Uncle John, to take it to pa for me, and he did. He rode over to Cliffmore last Saturday. That's a week ago, and don't you know it was a stormy day? Well, that's why we didn't go with him."

Sprite nodded her head wisely as she spoke, and the sunbeams danced on her rippling hair.

"And I'll tell you something I've thought of," she said. "It was Friday after school that I asked him about sending it, and he said we'd all take the trip to Cliffmore. And when Saturday came it was so stormy we couldn't go. I didn't say a thing, but I must have looked disappointed, for he said: 'Cheer up, little Sprite, for your prize shall reach Cliffmore to-day. I'm going over there, and I'll take it with me.'

"_Now_ I believe he wouldn't have gone so far on such a day for himself. I think he went for me."

"It would be just like Uncle John to do that," Rose said. "He's always doing something to make people happy."

As if to prove that his little niece spoke truly, he now appeared on the road in his big motor car, laughing when he espied the three

playmates, and gaily calling:

"Has anyone seen a small girl straying around this part of Avondale? Girl with brown curls, and rosy cheeks, answers to the name of Rose?"

"You needn't laugh, Uncle John, for truly I was afraid Great Aunt Rose would try to make you say that I must spend, at least, a part of my time with her, and oh, I didn't want to."

"Do I look as if anyone could make me give up what I considered mine?"

"No, no!" they cried in chorus.

"Then climb into my car, you three little tramps, and I'll take you for a ride."

CHAPTER XII

AUNT ROSE'S CALL

A week's vacation!

All of the pupils were delighted, but Princess Polly was especially happy, because with Rose, and Sprite, the week would be a week of pleasure, no lessons, and all play.

"What shall we do on Monday?" she asked, as they skipped along the sidewalk.

It was Monday morning, and she did not wish to have a moment wasted.

"Come over to my house, and we'll sit in the big hammock and talk, and perhaps something will happen that will just tell us what to do."

The gay-colored hammock had been hung on the sunny side of the house, and the three little friends sat swinging and talking, and soon they had planned enough doings to occupy a month, instead of a week.

They were talking of Lena, and Leslie, when Sprite asked:

"When have you seen Gwen Harcourt?"

"They haven't seen me for ever so long!" cried an answering voice, and Gwen appeared around the corner, laughing saucily, because she had

been listening, and had heard Sprite's question.

Of course she had some very large stories to tell regarding the private school that she was attending, and her classmates there.

"I wouldn't care to go to any other school," she said, "and I love to take the train every morning. I'd stay at home some days if I was near school and walked, but I like to ride on the trains so I never miss a day.

"Guess what I did just now," she said, laughing as if to imply that what she had done was an absolutely clever joke.

"What did you do?" Polly asked, not because she really cared, but rather from curiosity as to what especially abominable thing it had pleased Gwen to do.

Gwen never waited to be urged.

Seating herself on the piazza, railing, she swung her legs as she recounted the morning's happenings, making the list as long as possible.

"Just before I came over here I went into the room upstairs that mamma calls the 'Picture Gallery,' and I looked around for a while just to see which I liked the best.

"It seemed to me that the one that was on the first line, was looking right at me, and I _almost_ thought the pink feathers on her hat bobbed just a little.

"The longer I looked at her the more it seemed to me that she really was looking at me, and _once_ I thought she smiled. I had a lovely new knife that my cousin Jack had given me. I went close to the picture, and more than ever it seemed as if she smiled at me, and I thought if I had her out of the frame she'd be lovelier than any doll I own.

"It didn't take me more than ten minutes to whip out my little knife, and cut her right out from the background, but say! After I'd cut her out, she didn't look nearly as pretty as I had thought she would. Just look at her!

"The paint looks real dauby when you get close up to her."

"Why, Gwen Harcourt!" cried Princess Polly; "you truly did cut her from the picture!"

"Of course I did. Did you really s'pose I'd tell you I did if I didn't?"

"You might have been joking when you said it," said Polly.

"Well, I wasn't joking," Gwen replied, "and now I don't know where to put this, now I have it."

"What did you mean to do, when you first thought of cutting the picture out?" questioned Rose.

"Oh, I thought I'd keep her in the dolls' house, but she looks bigger in my hand than she did in the frame. I don't believe she'd go into the doll's house, and I don't believe I want her to, for really I don't care for her. Do either of you want her?"

She extended her arm, holding the picture at arm's length, while she looked from one to the other.

"We don't want her," said Polly, "and oh, this time, Gwen, your mamma will surely be angry!"

"Pooh! See 'f she is. I guess I'll run home and see what she says," chirped Gwen, and gaily humming, she ran down the walk, and hurried home.

Mrs. Harcourt had been entertaining guests for a few days, and it happened that soon after Gwen had left the house, the mischief had been discovered.

"Oh, can it be possible that there have been thieves prowling about the house in the night?" cried Mrs. Harcourt. "It really makes me feel quite ill to think of it."

At that moment, Gwen came flying into the house, and up the stairway.

"Somebody take this old picture and stick it back in the hole it came from. I thought it would make a nice big doll, but I guess I don't want her!"

"Oh, what a naughty thing for a child to do!" cried one of the ladies. "That fine picture is absolutely ruined."

"Naughty!" cried Mrs. Harcourt, "no, indeed! As you say, the picture is ruined, but Gwen has proved her love for Art, and her artistic nature. She felt so attracted to the picture that she was actually obliged to take it with her when she went out. She surely loves Art. As I have always said: 'Gwen is a most unusual child. She shows great force of character, and I can overlook the mistake she made in cutting the canvas, because the act showed me another fine trait,—the love of Art. I do wonder if she will be an artist?"

The guests were disgusted. They wondered how any mother could be so foolish as to think a piece of costly mischief showed either love of art or talent, instead of wilful wrong-doing.

"Gwen is a pretty child," said one woman, "and some one who had sense enough to correct her and make her behave, could train her to be a pleasing young girl, when she is a few years older, but her mother could never do that!"

"No, indeed," the other replied. "Mrs. Harcourt is spoiling her little daughter as fast as she can. I had promised to stay a week," she continued, "but I think I will make some excuse and leave here day after to-morrow. I am very fond of Mrs. Harcourt, but the child is so unpleasant that I can not remain."

The two friends were in the room that they had shared during their visit. In another room Mrs. Harcourt was changing Gwen's frock, and ribbons, to make her yet more attractive when she should appear at lunch. A less beautiful costume, and a bit of training in ordinary rules of courtesy, would have been far more beneficial. Mrs. Harcourt felt that Gwen must, at all times, be daintily dressed, but she permitted her to do or say whatever she chose, and at times when she was hopelessly rude, the silly mother thought her charming.

In the big hammock the three playmates still were swinging.

"Come!" said Polly, "let's walk around the garden, and when we come to the terrace, we'll sit down, and listen to the story that Rose promised to tell."

"No, the story that Sprite was to tell!" cried Rose.

"No, the story that Princess Polly found in the red book yesterday," Sprite said, laughing because the others did.

"We'll run a race!" cried Polly, "and the one that gets there last will be the one to tell the story."

The others agreed, and Polly counted:

"One! Two! _Three_!"

They were off like the wind, past the fountain, the gates, the big clump of rose bushes, and it happened that Rose and Sprite were the first to reach the terrace.

"All right!" cried Princess Polly, "I'll tell the story of the 'Big, Brave Knight.'"

"Does it begin with: 'Once upon a time'?" Sprite asked, eagerly.

"Oh, yes," Polly said. "Once upon a time there lived a knight who was big, and brave, and he loved a princess who was so beautiful that it was like looking at the sun to look at her face, because her beauty was so dazzling.

"She wasn't very happy, for who'd be happy when an old witch had enchanted her?"

"Oh, oo!" purred little Sprite, "I love a story that tells about folks that are enchanted."

"So do I," agreed Rose. "Now go on, Polly. How was she enchanted?"

"Oh, I wish I had the book right here, so I could read every word of it to you, but I let Leslie Grafton take it home to read, so I'll tell it as well as I can.

"Where did I stop? Oh, I know. I'd just told you that the lovely princess was enchanted. Lora was her name, and she lived in a fine castle way up on a great, high mountain. The picture showed the castle, and it looked as if the side of the mountain was all ledges.

"On sunny days, she wandered around the castle gardens, picking the flowers, or feeding her pets, and when storm clouds hung over the mountain, she strolled through the great halls, playing her guitar, and sweetly singing.

"Often she leaned on the wall that bordered the gardens, and for hours she would gaze at the far distant plains.

"'Across those plains will come the prince who will set you free,' the old witch had said, and then she had laughed, and under her breath had muttered: 'That is, if he has the bravery to ride his charger up this steep mountain side.'"

"Did a prince come?" questioned Sprite.

"And was he fine, and brave?" Rose asked.

Princess Polly laughed at their eager questions.

"The book says:

"'Many princes came, but when they saw the ledge going straight up to the castle, they turned back, saying:

"'No man could keep in the saddle, and no horse could climb such a huge crag as that. Both would fall and be dashed to pieces.'"

"One day, when the sun was bright and the air was very clear, the princess became restless, and tired of roaming through hall, and garden, and she ran to the wall, once more to look off across the plain.

"A long time she stood watching, when, far, far over where the sky and land seemed to meet, she saw something flashing in the sunlight.

"At first it appeared to stand still, but after a little while, she saw that it was coming nearer.

"Brighter and brighter flashed the spot that she had been watching, and a moment later, she saw that it was a spear held aloft, in the hand of a man in armor.

"On, on he came, and soon she saw that his armor was of silver, and that the plumes on his helmet were white.

"Nearer and nearer he rode, and now, as he reached the foot of the cliff, the Princess Lora saw that he was handsome, for his visor was up, and even from that height she could see that his eyes were dark, and fine. He had seen her portrait that a great artist had painted, and he had vowed that he would win her.

"Bravely he urged his white steed up the side of the cliff, and the charger, placing his hoofs in the crevices, climbed steadily higher until, at last, the brave knight stood at the castle gate, blowing his bugle to demand admittance.

"At the sound of the bugle, the iron gates flew open, he rode boldly into the courtyard, and up to the door. He had shown himself to be so brave that no one dared oppose him, and after staying a month at the castle, he rode away, carrying the lovely Princess Lora as his bride, and they lived happy ever after."

"There!" cried Polly, "I've told that almost word for word."

"That was a lovely story," said Rose, "and I always like them when they commence, 'Once upon a time,' and end with, 'They lived happy ever after.'"

"So do I," said Sprite, "and just think of the lovely times we'll have this Summer, when we're all at the Cliffs, at Cliffmore, that is, if you're coming down to the shore. Oh, are you?"

"Uncle John says we'll enjoy the earlier part of the Summer here, and then go over to his lovely house at Cliffmore for the rest of the Summer."

"Why, that's just what my papa said, last evening," said Princess Polly, "and I do believe they've planned it together."

"I'll go home just as soon as school closes," said Sprite, "and I'll be company for ma, I'll gather lovely shells for you to keep, I'll read to pa evenings, but most of all, I'll be watching the long white road that leads from the pier.

"Oh, let's play this hammock is the boat to Cliff more!" she cried, "and we'll call the different landings."

"All right!" cried Rose, "and do you hear that funny creak?" she asked. "Well, that is the steamer just starting off."

They swung a while, and then Sprite shouted the name of the first stopping-place.

"Seaman's Port!" she cried. "This is where they always roll off lots of barrels."

"What's in them?" Polly asked.

"Oh, salt pork, and vegetables, and, oh, all sorts of things that they can't buy on the island."

"Seafarm Ledge!" she next shouted.

"All of us get out here!" cried Sprite, "because this is the place where the gentlemen sit around and do nothing, while the ladies dress up, and walk, and walk, and walk up and down the board walk."

There must have been a very rough sea, for the hammock rolled and pitched, until it seemed as if the little voyagers would surely be thrown overboard, so violently did the steamer lurch.

The passengers were evidently but little frightened. In truth, they appeared to think the trip a huge joke, for they laughed gaily; at last Sprite cried:

"Cliffmore! Cliffmore! Every one get out, because this steamer goes no farther!"

"Is that true, Sprite, that the steamer *Queen of the Ocean* stops at Cliffmore, and then turns and goes back?"

"Oh, yes," said Sprite. "Some of the boats go farther, but that vessel never does."

"Well, we had a fine trip in our hammock-steamer," said Princess Polly, "and if our vessel did pitch pretty badly, what did we care, while the

sky was blue and cloudless overhead?"

"It has been bright and sunny here at Avondale," said Sprite, "and I've had a lovely time, and I only long to go home, just because it is home."

"But soon after you go back to Cliffmore, Rose and I will come, and then we three will play together, and play all day, because it will be vacation, no lessons, and no school."

"Mamma is sure that this Summer at Cliffmore is to be delightful," said Polly.

"And Uncle John says that there will be lots of good times, but that he knows of one happening that will be a surprise for everyone!" said Rose.

Those who would like to meet Princess Polly again at Avondale, with her dearest friend Rose Atherton, to be with them again at Cliffmore, where they are constantly with little Sprite, may enjoy all their "good-times" in—

"Princess Polly at Play."

END