

Princess Polly's Gay Winter

Amy Brooks

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PRINCESS POLLY'S GAY WINTER

By AMY BROOKS

AUTHOR OF
"Princess Polly," "Princess Polly's Playmates,"
"Princess Polly at School," "Princess Polly by the Sea,"
"Princess Polly at Play," etc.

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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.

"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 Seaford 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 reproofing.

"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 sory 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 cozy 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't 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 throu

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