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Obvious typographical errors have been corrected. For a complete list, please see the [end of this document](#).

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PRINCESS POLLY AT PLAY



"They were out in the sunshine.

PRINCESS POLLY AT PLAY

By **AMY BROOKS**

AUTHOR OF

"Princess Polly," "Princess Polly's Playmates," "Princess
Polly at School," "Princess Polly by the Sea,"
"Princess Polly's Gay Winter," etc.



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[9]

PRINCESS POLLY AT PLAY

CHAPTER I

ToC

POLLY, ROSE AND GWEN

A Summer at Cliffmore!

Princess Polly and Rose Atherton could think of little else.

It was true that Avondale was a charming place in which to live, and there were pleasant schoolmates and merry times when Winter came. There were fine lawns and beautiful flowers everywhere, but Polly and Rose loved the shore, and surely the salt air was delightful, and the beach a lovely place on which to romp. There was Captain Seaford, whose little daughter, Sprite, had spent the winter at Avondale, and a pleasant little playmate and classmate she had been.

[10]

She had returned to her home at Cliffmore, and now was counting the days when Princess Polly and Rose would arrive, and every morning she would stand in the doorway of her home on the beach, and look in the direction in which Avondale lay.

It happened one morning that at the same moment that Sprite opened the door to look out, Princess Polly and Rose were talking of her. They, too, were out in the sunshine.

"How pretty Sprite looked last Summer when she played that she was a little mermaid, and lay on the rocks looking down into the water, her long yellow hair hanging down over her shoulders," Polly said.

"And the day that she invited me over to her house," said Rose, "her dress was light green, and she wore a string of coral around her neck. I thought she looked sweet then." [11]

"How we did enjoy her house! We never saw one like it. It was a ship's hulk, turned upside down, and divided up into rooms. Oh, but it was cosey!" Polly said.

"And it won't be long before we'll be there at the shore, playing with Sprite just as we did last Summer," said Rose.

A long time they stood talking. There were such delightful memories of Cliffmore, and so many pleasures to anticipate. There would be sailing trips on the "Dolphin," the yacht belonging to Captain Atherton, and Captain Atherton himself had hinted at some sort of merry-making that would occur at his fine home on the shore.

"Uncle John doesn't say whether it is to be a party, or what it will be, but when I asked him if it would be fine, he took me on his knee, and he said: [12]

"Rose, little Rose, it will be the brightest, the happiest event that I ever attended,' so I guess it will be fine, for Uncle John always means what he says," Rose concluded.

"Oh, we can't help wondering what it will be like, and just when it will be," Princess Polly said, her hands tightly clasped and her eyes bright with excitement.

"It's a lovely place to stay in, even if there wasn't a single thing planned for amusement, but when you know there'll be ever so many good times happening during the Summer, it makes us wild to start for Cliffmore."

The sound of footsteps running made them turn, just as Gwen Harcourt came racing toward them. [13]

She was a little neighbor, so bold, so regardless of the feelings of others, so apt to tell outrageous stories, that Polly and Rose were not fond of her. She never stopped to question if she were welcome, but entered any house where the door stood open, and at once made herself quite at home, always remaining until she chose to go.

She was evidently quite excited. Her short, curling hair blew about her face, and her cheeks were red.

"What do you think?" she cried. "I've just come from that big house over there, where the people have just moved in. I couldn't tell if I'd like to know them, unless I went when I could see them, so this morning I went right up to the door, and as it wasn't locked, I opened it, and went in." [14]

"Why, Gwen Harcourt!" Rose exclaimed.

"Well, what?" Gwen said pertly.

"S'pose I was going to wait and wonder what those people were like? I guess not. I went right straight in and looked at them, so now I know.

"The lady isn't much to look at, and she wasn't dressed up the least bit, and the baby that the nursemaid was holding was awful homely.

"Its face was red, and its hair was sort of straight and stringy, and when it cried, and that was most all the time I was there, it made a perfectly horrid face.

"There's a boy there, too, and I didn't like him very well," she continued. "He talked to me some, but he wants to do all the talking, and I don't like that. I want to talk most of the time, myself." [15]

Polly and Rose managed not to laugh.

"Perhaps if you had been willing to listen, and let him talk more, you might have liked him better," Polly said.

"No, I wouldn't!" Gwen said, stoutly, "for what little he did say made me mad. Think how rude he was! When I told him my whole *truly* name was Gwendolen Armitage Harcourt, he just said:

"'H'm! Is that so? Well, my name is Jona Jonathan Ebenezer Montgomery, and that beats your name all hollow.' The lady laughed, but she said: 'Don't tease the little girl. That is not your name at all. Why not tell her what your real name is?'

"He didn't do it. He just said: 'Oh, bother!' and ran out doors. I didn't like the boy, but the big room seemed duller after he went out, so after a while I slipped out, and when I saw you two talking, I came over here. What were you talking about?" [16]

"We were talking about the fine times we'll have at Cliffmore this Summer," Polly said, "and we can hardly wait to enjoy them."

"I'd not care to go there," Gwen said, with a toss of her head.

"Well, then," said Rose, "it's lucky you don't have to go there."

"Yes, isn't it?" Gwen said, cheerfully. "I could if I wanted to. Mamma will go

wherever I wish, that is if I just act horrid enough."

"Why, what do you mean?" Polly asked, and Gwen laughed.

"You're funny girls," she said. "Don't either of you know that the way to get your own way is to scream and be just as horrid as you can until your mamma 'gives in?'" [17]

"I'd not care to act like that," Princess Polly said, and Rose said: "Neither would I."

"Well, I want my own way, all the time and everywhere, and that's the way I get it," declared Gwen, and she danced off down the avenue, humming as cheerfully as if she had told of doing pleasant things.

"Isn't it queer?" Rose said. "Gwen tells of being disagreeable, as if she felt proud of it."

"Mrs. Harcourt does the same thing," said Primrose Polly. "She's always telling of horrid pranks, and rude things that Gwen says, and she tells them as if she thought Gwen very smart to act so. It isn't odd that Gwen behaves so badly, for she likes to act just perfectly horrid. She says so, and if she thinks her mamma likes it, what is there to make her stop?" [18]

"And Uncle John says, oh, I'd not tell exactly what he says, but he said only yesterday that he could not understand how any woman could let her little daughter grow up like a weed. He said Gwen was pretty to look at, but as unpleasant as a nettlebush. I'd not like anyone to say that of me," Rose said.

"Well, no one ever would say that about you," Polly said lovingly.

"Nor you," replied Rose.

Then, their arms clasping each other, they slipped down the sidewalk.

It was but a few days longer that they must wait before sailing to Cliffmore.

The year before, they had made the trip by train, but this time they were intending to go a short distance by rail, and then, on Captain Atherton's yacht, complete the trip by water. It would be a delightful sail, and as every member of the party loved the water, it was sure to be a merry little sailing trip down the bay. [19]

Gwen Harcourt had not spoken truthfully when she had said that she would not wish to go to Cliffmore. Indeed, that very morning she had used her unpleasant method in an effort to coax her mother to go to Cliffmore, and for the first time in her little life, it had not worked.

She had heard from Polly, Rose, and Sprite of the pleasure that they had enjoyed there, and she had at once decided that no other place could be as delightful.

"I guess I can go there as well as they can," she had whispered to herself, and then, running up to the big living room she had first asked, then coaxed, and there, as a final effort, had screamed for a half hour. Mrs. Harcourt would, as usual, have quickly agreed at once to spend the Summer as Gwen wished, but it happened that other plans already made, rendered it impossible. The silly woman offered everything that she could think of to pacify Gwen, but Gwen declared that nothing would make up to her for the refusal to go to Cliffmore. [20]

Then when she found her screaming wholly useless, she dried her eyes, and rushed out and down the avenue to tell Polly and Rose that she would not care to go there.

If she had waited a day longer to tell them it would have been as well, because Mrs. Harcourt, lest the disappointment might be too hard for Gwen, had, at great inconvenience, changed her plans, and on the following day she told Gwen that Cliffmore would be their summer home. [21]

Gwen did not rush out this time to tell the news.

Had she not just said that she would not care to go there?

"I'll say nothing about it, and when they get to Cliffmore, they'll be s'prised to find me there, but I'll act as if I'd known all along that I'd be there," thought Gwen.

Mrs. Harcourt and Gwen went the next day, and thus it happened that when the "Dolphin" sailed up to the pier, the first person that Rose and Polly saw was Gwen, sitting high on the top of a tall post! It was a most successful surprise.

"Hello!" she cried, with impish laughter, "I got here 'fore you did!" [22]

"Why so you did," Polly replied. "When did you come?"

"Oh, I've been here some time," she said, laughing again.

"Well, you've not been here a month, Gwen Harcourt!" said Rose. "It was only three days ago that you were in Avondale, and you said then that you'd not care to go to Cliffmore!"

"Well, I didn't go," cried Gwen, "I've *come*, and I'm going to stay!"

Of course Sprite had come to meet them, and as the three walked up the pier they saw that Gwen made no attempt to follow.

She wished them to know that she was at Cliffmore, but having enjoyed their look

of surprise, she preferred to keep her position on the post.

It was so conspicuous that she knew that everyone coming up from the boats would surely see her, and beside that pleasure, she could stare at all the arrivals. Oh yes, her perch on the post delighted her. [23]

Not satisfied with staring at the people, she commenced to make remarks about them as they passed. As her remarks were largely directed at their clothes, they were not much pleased.

"Oh, what big feet!" she said, when a big woman passed her, and to another she said: "What a funny hat."

A fat man turned to frown at her when she said: "My! He must weigh a ton," and a girl with long red braids blushed hotly when Gwen cried:

"Red! Red! Fire! Fire!"

Her mother would have thought any other child uncouth and ill-bred, if she did any one of the many outrageous things that Gwen was always doing. In Gwen she thought it bright and smart, and Gwen held the same opinion, but a young sailor, happening along just in time to hear her say something about a Jack Tar, that was not quite pleasing, stopped for an instant, and looked into her bold, blue eyes. [24]

"Do you know what you need, you little Monkey?" he cried. "You need to have someone give you a big ducking, and then you'd learn not to be so smart."

Gwen was too frightened to speak. She thought the sailor meant to give her the ducking that he said she needed, and she turned so pale that he let go his hold upon her, leaving her still sitting upon the post, but as he turned to go he shook his finger at her.

"Not another word, sissy, or someone'll duck you, if I don't," he said. [25]

A long time she sat motionless upon the post until not only the sailor, but all of the people had left the pier. Then, looking cautiously around to learn if anyone was near, she slipped to the ground, and ran at top speed toward the hotel where she told a most remarkable tale of the sailor's rudeness to her, winding up by telling that he had been so mean as to duck her.

"My dear little Gwen!" said her fond mamma.

"Her serge frock seems rather dry for one that has just been plunged into the water," said a lady who sat near them on the piazza.

"Oh, look at her shoes! They're dry too!" cried a small boy. "Say! When did you get your ducking?"

"You stop laughing, Max Deland!" cried Gwen. "I guess I could tell whether he ducked me or not better than you could, for you weren't there!" [26]

"Oh, yes, you could *tell!*" cried the small boy, "but it might not be so, for all that, Gwen Harcourt."

Mrs. Harcourt rose quickly, and taking Gwen by the hand, left the piazza, and went up to her room.

"Strange that any woman would be so foolish as to credit a yarn like that even if it is her own child that tells it," said the lady who had spoken of the dry frock that Gwen declared had just been plunged into water.

"Yes, it is strange, but I've known other women who were nearly as blind to their children's faults," her friend replied.

"The child is really pretty, but so bold, and pert that although she arrived less than a week ago, there is not a guest at this hotel who does not feel relieved when she leaves the piazza. Only think," the lady continued, "she was out here this morning, sitting in that big chair that old Mr. Pendleton likes to have. He's ill, and Gwen knew that he came out expecting to sit in it, but she looked up at him, and did not stir. 'Gwen, dear,' Mrs. Harcourt said; 'I think Mr. Pendleton would like that chair.' 'Well, I like it, and I'm going to keep it,' Gwen said, swinging her legs, and settling back in the chair. 'You really musn't mind her,' Mrs. Harcourt said. [27]

"'I don't intend to,' he said, and Mrs. Harcourt looked as if she wondered what he meant."

Captain Seaford sitting in the sun, and mending nets, was aware that something was causing great, and unusual excitement in his house.

He sat just outside the door, but the sound of hurried footsteps, of eager conversation, of furniture being moved about, betokened something disturbing in the atmosphere.

"Comp'ny coming, or some kind o' storm brewing!" he muttered with a knowing wink, although no one was near to see the comical grimace.

Mrs. Seaford, usually calm and cheerful, now appeared in the doorway, a frown puckering her forehead, and a troubled look in her eyes. [29]

"I've been over to the village," she said, "and while I've been gone, someone has been through the house, opened every drawer, pulled out the contents and strewn them on the floor, and made a general mess that I've worked an hour to clear up. Have you noticed anyone around the place?"

"Haven't seen a soul," declared the Captain, "and I've been busy right here since before you went out.

"Seems to me I did hear someone moving about at one time, but I'm not even sure of that."

"Well, whoever it was managed to move about enough to make work for me to clear up," Mrs. Seaford said.

"There's only one door to this house so how could anyone get out without passing me? You must surely be mistaken." [30]

"The person, whoever it was, didn't care to pass you coming in, or going out of the house, so climbed through the window. On his way out, he knocked some plants from the window-sill. Nothing has been stolen, so I can't see the object in ransacking the house."

"Taint poss'ble you're nervous, and imagine someone's been in, is it?" he asked, anxiously scanning her face.

"Imagine?" Mrs. Seaford said. "Well, come in, and see what you think. I've cleared the worst of it, but here's enough left to convince you."

He dropped the net on the sand, and went in. One look was enough.

"What in the world——!" he said, and no more, but his face spoke volumes.

It remained a mystery. Who would care to disturb the contents of the odd dwelling of the Seafords? Not a thief, surely, for it was well known that while the genial Captain had, at one time, been well to do, he had, for the past few years, had a struggle for existence. The old ship's hulk, inverted, and furnished for a home, held but one treasure, love, and that, priceless as it was, could not be stolen. [31]

Who was the intruder? How had he come, and how had he vanished?

Dwellers at Cliffmore talked of it, at their homes, at church, and on the beach, but no one could give the slightest clue that might help in detecting the intruder.

Excitement usually lasted regarding one matter until another subject was suggested, when the villagers would turn with fresh interest to the latest bit of news. [32]

Generally, it was a happening of small importance, that gained its prominence from having been frequently described, but one morning something occurred that shook the little fishing village, as Captain Seaford said, "from stem to stern."

When Mrs. Wilton, the housekeeper at Captain Atherton's Summer home, "The Cliffs," arose early one morning, she noticed that the Captain had forgotten the French window that opened on the porch. It evidently had been open on the evening before, and, by an oversight, had remained open all night. At a glance she saw that someone had been through the lower part of the house.

Drawers were wide open, their contents strewn upon the floor.

Flowers had been taken from the large jars that held them, and left with their wet foliage and stems lying upon the polished table. [33]

Delicate pieces of china had been lifted from the lower shelves of the china closet, and placed upon the table, the window seats, and even the piano boasted two dainty cups that the visitor, whoever it might be, had placed upon the keyboard.

"Nothing is stolen," the housekeeper said, in reporting the mischief to Captain Atherton, "and all the queer doin's are on the first floor. Do you see that it looks as if the same person that went all over Captain Seaford's house, has been roving through this one? Nothing was stolen there, but everything had been handled and pulled around."

"I'll go out into the garden and think it over," he replied.

He left the house, but as he reached the lower step that led from the piazza he saw that the bold intruder, not satisfied with the mischief perpetrated in the house, had tried his hand at the garden. Beautiful plants had been lifted from their pots and thrown onto the walk, the hose lay beside them, running a stream, the fountain had been set running, and an old broom, used by the gardener, to sweep the walks, lay in the lower basin of the fountain.

[34]

The housekeeper followed him out onto the piazza.

"If you please, sir, I'd like just to say that I locked every door and window, except the one that opens onto this piazza, from the library. I went upstairs, knowing that you were still reading, and thinking you'd like that window open 'til you went to your room for the night, when you'd be sure to shut and lock it."

[35]

John Atherton nodded, and walked along the path. He knew that the housekeeper was anxious to shift all responsibility from her broad shoulders onto his.

"I guess I left that French window open, so that fault is mine, but who would be interested to rove through a home, pulling things to pieces, and making disorder, solely for the fun of doing it? Whoever it is, does not care to rob. It's a puzzle that must be looked into."

The children were greatly excited, and inclined to look upon Polly and Rose with envy.

It was interesting to listen while older people talked and argued as to how it happened, and what sort of person played the pranks. Before the Summer guests had half finished discussing the happening at Captain Atherton's house, they were again startled.

[36]

It was early one morning, a half hour before breakfast would be served, when a big, florid woman came down the stairway to the lower hall, declaring that someone had been in her room, doing a deal of mischief.

"Every article in my bureau drawer has been pulled out and thrown upon the floor, gowns have been removed from my closet, and are piled up on chairs in a heap, and my hats have been taken from their boxes and packed up on my bureau. Something must be done about it!" she declared in anger, and really one could not blame her.

The proprietor appeared, and promised all sorts of things to pacify the woman and there the matter appeared to end, for search as they would, no trace of the culprit could be found. The other guests felt uneasy.

[37]

"Who could possibly guess whose room will be ransacked next?" said one lady, to another who sat beside her at breakfast, to which the other replied:

"A few more happenings of this kind, and I'll pack my trunks, and leave for a place where I can, at least, expect law and order."

The guests of the hotel found it an interesting theme for conversation, and talked of it morning, noon and night, until old Mr. Pendleton, the invalid, became so tired of hearing about it that his patience at last gave way.

"What a fuss! What a nuisance of a fuss! I declare. Women are upset if their finery is tossed around a bit. Nothing was stolen, so why complain? Why get excited?"

[38]

No one replied to his outburst. It was well known that to reply to Mr. Pendleton was apt to provoke a torrent of abuse, so he was allowed to sit in his big chair in the corner of the piazza, looking with sharp, black, bead-like eyes from one woman to the other, silently amused, because he believed that they dared not answer.

He was a tough, wiry old man, not really ill, but believing himself to be an invalid, and enjoying the belief. Some one had heard a physician say that an event, or happening of any sort that would startle him into quick action would teach him that the health that he believed lost, was still in his possession.

One morning the queerest thing happened, and as it was just after breakfast, all the guests of the hotel were present to share the great excitement.

[39]

While the guests were at breakfast, the maids had put their rooms in order, and as it bid fair to be a hot day, nearly everyone decided to spend the morning on the broad piazza.

Mr. Pendleton, as usual, sat in his favorite corner. He was talking with another man about some distant city that each had often visited. Evidently there was something about which they could not agree, for their voices rose in angry dispute.

"I'm right in my opinion!" shouted Mr. Pendleton, in his thin, shrill voice.

"And, sir, let me tell you that *I* am right!" boomed the fat man in a growling bass.

"I'll get my map and prove what I say!" cried Mr. Pendleton, springing from his chair, and starting toward the hall.

[40]

The big man's laugh made him increase his speed. The other guests were amused, but they were not prepared for the next thing that happened.

Old Mr. Pendleton came tearing down the stairs, at the risk of breaking his neck,

his cheeks flushed, and his small, black eyes blazing.

"It's an outrage! It's disgusting! It's not to be endured!" he shouted. "My room has been entered, and my belongings tossed about! My pajamas are spread out on the floor as if someone meant to take a pattern of them! My watch is soaking in the wash bowl, and my brush and comb are each in a slipper. My topcoat is out of the window and sprawling in the sun on the roof of this piazza, and every neck-tie I own is hanging from the chandelier! I won't stand it!"

[41]

He paused for breath, and the woman whom he had vexed a few days before, was so unwise as to speak:

"It might be well for you to realize just now that women are not the only ones who are upset when their finery is tossed about. As nothing was stolen, why complain? Why get excited?"

"Madam! You haven't the least idea of tact," he cried. "If you had you'd—" but before he could complete his speech, the proprietor arrived, and a much harder task he had to appease the wrath of Mr. Pendleton, than that of the fat woman whose room had been entered a few days before.

The mystery might never have been solved but for something that occurred on the following morning.

[42]

A room on the second floor had windows looking out upon the sea. The door stood open, and a maid passing along the hall, paused to look in. Guests were not in the habit of leaving their room doors wide open. What she saw made her tip-toe softly away to a screen in the hall.

From her position she could watch the inmate of the room.

That room had been hired by the fat man with the big voice who often talked, and oftener disputed with Mr. Pendleton.

It was easy to touch a button on the wall close beside her, and the bell-boy responded in a few seconds. The maid held up her finger, at the same time pointing toward the open door, and whispering:

"Sh—! Go quick and get Mr. Buffington. Tell him somebody is in his room. Don't make a sound here. I'll watch while you're gone. Rush now!"

[43]

Mr. Buffington, big and ponderous, soon appeared, puffing like an engine. The maid saw him as he appeared above the stairs, and quickly held up her finger, as a signal to him to make no noise.

Puzzled, yet impressed, the big man tip-toed along until he stood in the doorway.

The intruder stood, back toward the door, and for the moment, was so occupied with pulling over the contents of a large trunk that footsteps outside the door were unnoticed.

"You little rascal!"

These words shouted made the intruder actually jump.

"Ah, now, Miss Gwen, how happened ye in there?" said the maid.

Gwen, thoroughly frightened, tried to rush from the room, but it was useless. The big man filled the doorway. He did not intend to hurt her, when he firmly grasped her arm, but he did intend to give her a lesson, and he proceeded to do it, walking her along the hall on the way to the stairway.

[44]

Usually, Gwen's boldness was equal to any emergency, but this time she was too frightened to object, to wriggle in the firm grasp, or indeed, to do anything other than allow him to take her wherever he chose, and he chose—the piazza filled with guests.

Mrs. Harcourt, at the farthest end of the piazza, busy with her embroidery, did not look up when the two appeared.

"I found *this* in my room!" said the angry man. "Anyone who owns it may claim it. *This* is what has been entering rooms, and handling other people's property."

[45]

"Oh, mamma! Why don't you come and tell them I don't do such things!"

Of course Mrs. Harcourt dropped her embroidering frame, and rushed forward, snatching Gwen from the big man's grasp.

"'Twould be useless, because I caught her just as she had opened my trunk, and was examining all my belongings. The best thing to do with your smart girl, is to keep her away from hotels, unless you can keep a chain on her to keep her from prowling," growled Mr. Buffington.

"You don't understand children!" declared Mrs. Harcourt, as with Gwen, she went up the stairway to her room, to which the big man responded: "I shouldn't want to if they're all like that!"

Of course the piazza was alive with buzzing voices.

[46]

"What a perfectly horrid child!"

"I'd be ashamed of her if she were mine, the little imp!"

These and similar remarks were to be heard on all sides.

Gwen had been pert and saucy, bold, and annoying in many ways, but that a little girl could be the person who had boldly entered any house, or any room at the hotel, poking her impudent little nose into any house or room that remained unlocked, was really a surprise.

They had all believed it to be the work of a man, but no one could understand what prompted him to handle every article in the place that he entered, yet never steal a thing. Now it was easier to understand. Gwen had everything that love could think of, or that wealth could provide, but her curiosity was great, and she could not keep her mischievous hands off from things belonging to others.

Mrs. Harcourt, angry over what she thought was "outrageous rudeness," packed her trunks, and in an hour's time, left the hotel.

[47]

[48]

CHAPTER III

ToC

LITTLE SEA NYMPHS

Polly and Rose were walking along the beach on the way to call for Sprite. They had not decided how to spend the morning, but whatever they chose to do, they surely would enjoy themselves, for never were three playmates happier in each other's company.

"A long time ago when you first came to Avondale to live at Sherwood Hall, we named you Princess Polly. We never seemed to think of you as Polly Sherwood, your truly name," Rose said.

"And I liked you the first day I met you by the brook," Polly said, "and I thought Rose Atherton was such a pretty name."

"Sprite's name just fits her," said Rose, a moment later, "for she looks like a sprite, or a sea nymph, and so Sprite Seaford seems just the name for her."

"There she is now, coming toward us. Let's run to meet her."

"I took the telescope, and looked up the beach," Sprite said, when they met, "and kept looking until I saw you. Then I put it back on the mantel, and ran to meet you. Now come over to the place I call the bay."

[49]

She led the way, and they followed. The bay, as Sprite called it was a place where a ledge projected into the water in such a way that the incoming waves rushed past it, sweeping up onto the sand in a curving line.

It was not much of a bay, but it served as a name, and they always knew what she meant when she spoke of it.

Its shallow water was fine to play in, and when the tide went out, there always remained a little pool that reflected floating clouds.

[50]

On its clear surface they skipped flat stones, and they marvelled to see how skillful was little Sprite.

"Nine skips, and then a hop! That makes ten," said Polly, "and I can only make mine skip seven times."

"Oh, but you can do as well as I if you practice enough. I've always lived here at the shore," Sprite said, "and the flat stones have been my toys."

It was fine to compete with her, and Rose and Polly worked very hard in their effort to make a better fling.

"Eight!" declared Polly, and for a number of times, she sent the stones skipping eight times across the glassy little pool.

"Seven!" cried Rose, "and it almost went eight, and then didn't. Wasn't that provoking?"

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"Eight!" she shouted a moment later.

"Nine!" squealed Polly. "Nine! Who'd have believed I could?"

"I would," replied Sprite, "because you're trying so hard, and because you can do

anything."

"Oh, I can't!" Polly said.

"Well, you sing, and play, and you dance beautifully; after all that, just skipping stones doesn't seem so very much," Sprite answered quickly.

"It does to me because I've never done it before. It's great fun."

The sun was higher, and warm from exercise, they sat down in the shadow of the cliff to rest, and cool off.

They talked of the ships that appeared on the horizon, wondering what their cargoes might be. They talked of all sorts of things, but it was Sprite who gave a surprise.

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"Guess who has gone way, way over in that big yellow house on the cliff to live. Guess!" she said, and her eyes were twinkling.

"Oh, tell us," said Polly.

"Yes, you'd better tell us," said Rose. "We couldn't ever guess."

"Won't you guess?" Sprite asked.

"What's the use," said Polly. "We couldn't guess who it is in a month!"

"Well, it's Gwen Harcourt," Sprite said.

"Gwen Harcourt!" cried Polly and Rose in the same breath. "Why, how funny. Her mamma said she was tired of Cliffmore."

"Yes, and she said she didn't like any of the people that were here for the Summer," said Rose.

[53]

"Gwen said her mamma said that, but she said the reason was because she was provoked, and Gwen said she teased and teased her to stay, so she did, and they truly are in that big yellow house on the cliff. There's only about a dozen people boarding there, and Gwen said it seemed more select than the place where she'd been staying."

"I said: 'You like Polly Sherwood and Rose Atherton,' and she said, 'Yes, I like them, but it's the grown people that we don't care for,'" concluded Sprite.

"It was the grown people that didn't like Gwen, and no wonder," said Rose. "Who would like to have her trunks and boxes emptied on the floor, and all the hats and dresses pulled over? I don't believe anyone in that yellow house, or any other house will like to have her do that."

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A cool breeze blew in from the ocean, and the three sprang to their feet.

"Let's pull off our shoes and stockings and dance on the thin edge of the water," cried Sprite.

"I'll sing a song mamma taught me."

They clasped hands, and gracefully they skipped in time with the pretty song.

"We are water nymphs so free,
We are merry sisters three.
When the sunbeams kiss the foam
From our coral cave we roam,
And we float up to the strand
Where we dance upon the sand.

"When the moon with silvery ray
Glistens on the tossing spray,
Then upon the beach we dance,
Fleet of foot we whirl and prance.
Whirling, swaying, gay and free,
Merry water nymphs are we."



"Their graceful forms swaying."

It was a pretty sight.

[55]

The three lovely faces, bright eyed, and rose tinted cheeks, their graceful forms swaying, swinging, whirling, their white feet nimbly keeping time to the song that Sprite sang.

The guests at the big yellow house on the ledge had already found that Mrs. Harcourt was a pleasant woman to talk with, but they also had learned that she permitted her small daughter to be as rude and unpleasant as she chose. It never required a great length of time for anyone to learn that.

At the breakfast table, the first morning after they had left the hotel and had engaged rooms at the big house on the ledge, Gwen showed her rudeness by declaring that she could not eat any of the food that was served.

Mrs. Harcourt looked around at the other guests, remarking:

[56]

"Gwen has such refined taste that quite often really good food fails to tempt her."

Thus encouraged, Gwen spoke for herself:

"But there's nothing on this table that is good. I wonder any of you can eat it."

The guests were disgusted with the silly child, and sillier mother. She had acted in about the same manner at every meal.

It happened that she had been up in her room over the piazza on the morning that her three little friends were dancing upon the beach.

They were too far distant for her to guess who they might be.

The field glasses lay on the dresser, and Gwen snatched them, ran to the window, and peeped at the dancing figures.

"Oo—oo! It's Princess Polly, and Rose and Sprite. I'm going right over to see them, and dance with them, too!"

[57]

She flung the glasses down into the nearest chair, and ran down the stairs, across the lawn, and then commenced to make her way carefully down the rough steps that had been cut in the ledge.

Even Gwen could not descend those steps at high speed.

Once on the sand she believed she could hasten, but the tide never reached the ledge upon which the house stood, so the sand at its base was dry, and anything but easy to hurry over.

At last she reached the damp part, and then how her feet flew over the firm, level surface.

She seemed tireless as she sped along, and she ran without stopping until she stood before them. They had not seen her approaching, because a high cliff had

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hidden her until she sprang out from behind it.

"Hello!" she cried.

"Hello!" they replied. "Going to dance with us?"

"Of course," Gwen said shortly. "That's why I came here."

She was a fine little dancer, and soon the four were tripping lightly over the sand, the three bare footed, but Gwen with shoes and stockings on, splashing as gaily through the shallow water as if she did not know that she was ruining a fine pair of new shoes.

Her pale blue stockings would hardly be improved by a drenching in salt-water.

The others had urged her to take them off, but for that very reason, she stubbornly refused, and laughed as the water rushed about her ankles at the first step. [59]

She knew that no reproof awaited her. Mrs. Harcourt hailed each new prank as a sure sign of her small daughter's originality.

Tormenting the pets that other guests had brought to the shore, hiding the embroidery frames that any lady might chance to leave lying on a chair, throwing hats or wraps over the piazza railing to drop at the foot of the cliff, all these things Mrs. Harcourt thought extremely amusing.

A pair of wet shoes would, of course, be very funny. Gwen was sure of that.

"Where's that new girl?" she asked when they paused to rest.

"She's gone out fishing with her brother," Rose replied, "and they intend to be out all day."

"Oh, well, I only asked for fun," Gwen said quickly. "She's pleasant, and I like her, but she can't keep still a minute, and that makes me tired." [60]

"Why, Gwen Harcourt, neither do you," said Rose, laughing.

"Me?" said Gwen. "Well, who wants to keep still? I didn't say I wanted to. I said it made me tired to watch her, because she,—because *she* doesn't keep still. That's different!"

A shout made them turn to look down the beach.

A boy, using his hands as a speaking tube, stood looking toward them, and calling loudly, "Gwen! Gwen!"

"Oh, that's Max Deland," said Gwen. "I'll go and see why he's calling me."

Without saying "Good-bye," she turned, and raced down the beach, and Polly and Rose and Sprite stood watching her flying figure. [61]

On, on she ran until at last, they saw that she had reached the boy who had shouted to her.

Then Princess Polly spoke:

"I wonder why he didn't run to meet her," she said, "instead of standing stock still and waiting 'till she'd run every step of the way?"

"I don't wonder," Sprite said, "because I've seen him do that so many times, and he tells her to 'do this,' and 'do that,' and 'come here,' and 'go there,' and she does just as he says every time."

"That's queer," Rose said, "because she never lets us tell her even how to play a new game. The minute we start to tell her how it is played, she says: 'Oh, I know all about it,' so of course we stop, and it is Gwen who is always saying, 'Come and do this,' and 'You must do it,' till we get tired of being 'bossed,' and never doing as we wish. She didn't do that way to-day. She danced with us, and never once told us how to do it." [62]

"Why, Polly!" cried Sprite, "she has always known that you were trained for dancing, and that you know the prettiest dances."

The three little friends still stood watching Gwen and Max.

They seemed to be discussing something upon which they could not agree, for as they watched, Max violently pointed toward some distant point on the shore, and stamped his foot, and each time Gwen would shake her curly head.

The boy seemed determined, and the girl obstinate.

"I wonder what he is telling her to do?" said Sprite, to which Polly replied: [63]

"I don't. I wonder why she doesn't do it?"

"Yesterday he dared her to go out on an old plank, and she did it and got a ducking," said Sprite. "P'r'aps it's something like that."

The two figures still stood out clearly, the boy evidently insisting, and the girl still shaking her head as if unwilling to do as he wished.

Some bathers came running down to the water, their gay colored caps covering

their hair, their sandals tied with ribbons.

Polly, Rose, and Sprite turned to see them take the first dip, and for a few moments watched them romping in the surf.

When they turned Max and Gwen had disappeared.

"I do wonder what they were planning to do?" said Polly, "and why Gwen seemed unwilling to do it, whatever it was." [64]

"So do I," said Rose, "because Max always wants to do the wildest things," to which Sprite added; "And you can't often find anything wilder than Gwen would enjoy."

It happened that Max and Gwen had disappeared behind a rough shanty that laborers were using for a toolhouse.

"Now don't be a fraidie-cat!" Max was saying. "What makes you act so? I called you a 'brick' the other day because I said you dared to do things that any girl but you wouldn't dare to do. Now here you are, acting just the way other girls act. 'Fore I'd be 'fraid to sail in a tub!" He hoped to make her do it.

"Well, if you're not afraid to, why don't you do it, instead of asking me to do it?" snapped Gwen. [65]

"Oh, so I can tell the other boys how brave you are," replied Max.

"They wouldn't think anything of me a doing it," he continued, quite regardless of his grammar, "because I'm a boy, and I'm s'posed to be brave, anyway, but you're a girl, and that's different.

"Come! Get in! I'll shove it!"

Gwen paused for a moment, then:

"Give me your hand!" she said.

She was afraid, but her silly vanity prompted her to do it. She knew that neither of her playmates would dare, and Max had promised to tell the other boys of the brave feat.

Max took her hand, and she sprang into the tub, crouching on the bottom, as he shoved it off into water a bit deeper than that in which they had been standing. [66]

The tub was roughly made and anything but clean. The workmen had used it for holding cement, but had emptied it, and left it on the beach where Max had found it.

He was very fond of coaxing others to do things that he himself would never have done. Now, safe on dry land, he stood cheering Gwen for her bravery.

"Well, come and wade out here and get me back," she cried. "I've proved that I dared to do it, and that's enough!"

"Wait till I get the fellows to come and see you out there in the tub. They might not believe me if I just told them!" shouted Max, and he raced off at top speed, paying no heed to Gwen's shrieks. No one could have guessed if Max heard her and yet kept on running, or whether the sound of his own footfalls drowned her cries. [67]

CHAPTER IV

WHAT MAX DID

Max ran up the beach at top speed, intent upon finding his "chum," and telling him that Gwen was actually in the tub, and then, daring him to race back and see her floating about in the shallow water.

Max and Jack had wagered a quantity of marbles that no girl, not even Gwen Harcourt, would dare to float in the rough old tub.

When Max reached the place where Jack had promised to wait for him, Jack was nowhere to be seen.

"Scamp!" cried Max. "He's gone off so as not to pay over those marbles I won. Well, he'll not get off so easy, for I'll find him, and *make* him pay!" [69]

With never a thought of Gwen, he started along the beach to search for Jack.

"Well, I'd not be mean enough to skin out like that," he cried as he hurried over the

hard, damp sands. He thought it very mean to elude paying the little bet, and as he ran, he told himself that he would have promptly paid the marbles if he had owed them to Jack, which was true.

Jack was mischievous, but he would never have left a little girl in the plight in which Max, with all his boasting, had left Gwen.

And although Max Deland searched in every place where Jack was likely to be, he did not find him.

"I'll not hunt for him!" he cried at last, "but I'll make him pay when I catch him!"

"Max! Max Deland!"

The voice was shrill and piping.

"Hello! Where are you?" Max shouted in reply, and the trim waitress from her position on the ledge, cried back;

"It's not where I am, but where you are that's worrying your mother. You're the first boy I ever saw that had to be called to dinner. Come in!"

She turned and ran into the house, while Max rushed toward the big dining-room.

He thought of Gwen during dinner, but he felt no fear for her safety. He believed that she had soon become tired of floating in the shallow water, had sprung from the leaky tub, and for hours had been playing with her friends.

That was not the case, however. Gwen, crouching in the tub, had waited quite patiently, watching for Max who was to return with Jack, while the tub bobbed and danced on the shallow water, and for a time she had found it rather amusing.

The clumsy craft had floated lightly, now toward the beach, now away, and she felt no fear because as often as a receding wave took her a few feet from the beach, an incoming wave brought her back.

Then the unexpected happened.

The tide had been turning, and a big wave snatched at the tub, bearing it farther out than it had yet been, while the next inrolling wave went up onto the beach without so much as touching it.

Gwen screamed with fright, when she saw that now the tub was steadily going away from the shore.

There was no one in sight, and she sank in a little heap on the bottom of the tub, too tired to continue shouting, and frightened at the thought of drifting out to sea.

The gulls flew down and looked at her as if wondering what she might be, and Gwen cowered, afraid of their great, flapping wings.

No one could say what might have happened, but just at the moment when her last bit of courage had fled, a fortunate thing occurred.

A tiny fishing craft was coming in, and as it neared the shore, one of the crew spied the floating tub, then a few moments later the man exclaimed:

"Why, there's a child in that leaky old tub, as true as I live!"

"Hi, there!" he shouted, and Gwen looked up, and wildly waved her hands.

"Sit still!" he commanded, "or something'll happen. Keep still, an' we'll pull ye in when ye come 'long side."

Very thankful was Gwen when later, she found herself safe on the deck, the rough tub bobbing away across the waves, while the fishermen listened to her story of the trick that Max had played.

"If that boy was mine I know what he'd get, for doing a mean trick like that!" said one man, to which another responded:

"And I'd be glad ter help ye give it ter him."

One would have thought that Mrs. Harcourt might have been anxious because of Gwen's long absence, and her non-appearance at the noon meal, but such was not the case.

Some one at the table spoke of Gwen, asking if she were ill.

"Oh, dear no!" Mrs. Harcourt said, with a light laugh; "Gwen is never ill, but she is so very popular that when she does not appear at meal time, I know that someone has urged her to lunch at her home. Gwen is dearly loved, and so is constantly being coaxed to remain at this house or that."

The other guests could not be blamed if they wondered who it might be who continually longed to have Gwen as a guest.

When the noon meal was over, the guests made their way out onto the piazza, seating themselves in little groups for an afternoon of chat and gossip.

Some of the ladies were doing fancy work with gay colored silks. Mrs. Harcourt always brought her embroidery frame to the piazza. Not that she did much

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[74]

needlework, but she thought it looked well to have it with her, even if she talked for hours, while the frame lay idle in her lap.

Someone said that the same piece of work was in the frame that was in it on the day of her arrival weeks before. [75]

She had taken a seat at the far end of the piazza, and she now looked about her to see who might be near her.

A tall matron, standing at a short distance, turned, and seeing a large rocker behind Mrs. Harcourt, walked slowly over, and seated herself in it. She had just arrived, and so had not yet seen Gwen.

Here was a chance to talk to a listener who did not know her little daughter, and Mrs. Harcourt grasped it.

"You doubtless heard me telling the others how everyone loves my small girl," she said.

"Yes, I heard what you said," the woman replied, in a manner that implied her lack of interest, but Mrs. Harcourt did not notice that.

"Well, really, when you see Gwen, you will not wonder, for you, like everyone else, will enjoy her. She's *so* original." [76]

Just at this point those who sat near the railing noticed two odd looking figures toiling up the rough-hewn stairway on the cliff.

Those who watched them turned to exchange amused glances, and then look toward Mrs. Harcourt.

Quite unaware of what was going on, Mrs. Harcourt continued:

"As I was saying, Gwen is really very unusual, and original, and at the same time, she is so very sweet tempered, that—," but the sentence was interrupted by the appearance upon the piazza of a rough looking fisherman, and a drenched, and very dirty small girl, whose sailor frock was wet with sea water, and be-daubed with cement. Her eyes were red and swollen with crying, her hair had lost its ribbon, and hung about her face. Truly she did not look attractive. [77]

"Could any of you fine ladies put down your needles long 'nough ter hear where I found this little lass?" said the man, "fer she looks like she needed 'tendin' to."

Gwen could at once have run to her mother, but she chose to cling to the fisherman's rough hand, and be gazed upon as an abused child. Mrs. Harcourt, trying to decide which shade of silk to use, did not even look up. She did not dream that Gwen had returned.

So surprised were the guests that, for the moment, no one spoke, and the man continued:

"Me'n' my mates found her floating out ter sea in a ol' tub what the carpenters had been usin' fer cement, an' we pulled her in. As the tub was a leakin', I guess 'twas 'bout time 'less ye wanted her ter be drowned." [78]

A shrill cry from Mrs. Harcourt followed by the sound of hurrying feet, and then:

"Oh, Gwen, my dear! Come away from that rough man!" she cried, and the instant silence showed the disgust that her words had provoked.

"Wal, I s'pose that's the kind of thanks that a poor feller can expect from a lady 'ristocrat!" said the fisherman as he turned to go, "but I'll say one thing more, an' that is that the young lad named Max is 'sponsible for the mischief. It was him what coaxed the little lass inter that ol' tub, an' then run off ter play." [79]

"Three cheers for this man!" cried a young fellow who had listened intently, and the guests responded with a will, and Mrs. Harcourt from the hall whence she had vanished with Gwen, wondered what it was all about.

She considered herself a cultured woman, yet she had not spoken one grateful word to the man who had rescued Gwen from her perilous position!

Of course Max denied that he had intended to play a trick on Gwen. He was a coward, and a coward rarely cares to "own up" when guilty.

Instead, he insisted that he only "dared" her to get into the tub, but that he never thought she would stay in it a moment after he was out of sight.

His mother believed him; the guests did not, but little cared Max. So long as she thought him perfect, he was quite happy, because he could do, at all times, exactly as he chose. That he usually chose to be very disagreeable was not to be wondered at. [80]

His mother thought his pranks most amusing, and his saucy speeches, smart, so he was quite content.

The oddest part of all was that Gwen really liked Max Deland. He was always getting her into scrapes, and as soon as she had escaped from one, she was ready for another.

Max never helped her. Instead, he left her to help herself. Gwen was wilful with all

of her girl playmates, but she would agree to anything that Max proposed, so when, in the afternoon of the following day, he told her that he was going to take a long tramp, Gwen was wild to know just where he was going, and coaxed to go too.

"Where are you going?" she asked for the third time.

"Oh, somewhere great!" Max said with a provoking chuckle.

"It would serve you just right if I said I didn't care where you went, but I do care, because I want to go too," Gwen said.

"I only wanted to tease you," Max replied, "and I'll let you go with me, Gwen. Turn 'round and look at that high hill over back of the house where we're staying. I'm going to climb to the top of that hill, and go down on the other side, just to see what there is 'round behind that hill."

"Then why don't you walk around it, instead of climbing?" questioned Gwen.

"Smarty!" Max said, at he same time looking very unpleasant.

"Oh, I don't care," Gwen hastened to say. "I like to climb. Come on!"

It did not look like much of a hill, but it proved to be hard to climb, for its sides were steep, and covered with wiry grass.

The sun was hot, and long before reaching the top, Gwen wished that she had not started at all.

Twice she stopped to take short pieces of stems or dry twigs from her slippers, and often the thorny branches of the low bushes scratched her bare arms.

Her sleeves were short, and thus her arms were unprotected. Max's arms were covered by his jacket sleeves.

"What a fuss you make over a little scratch!" he said, sharply.

"I'm *not* fussing over a scratch!" snapped Gwen. "I'm fussing over 'bout a hundred scratches!"

"Oh,—o—o!" Max drawled, as if he doubted the number.

"Well, look!" cried Gwen, holding her little arms red with scratches.

"Too bad," Max said, and Gwen, surprised, and pleased, followed him, as he made his way just ahead of her, holding back the bushes.

"Oh, Max, you're good," she said, and Max blushed at her praise. He thought himself exceedingly good, but he was delighted that Gwen thought so.

"This hill didn't look so very high, when we stood on the beach and looked back at it," said Gwen.

"N-no," admitted Max, "but all the same I'm glad we started early, and we'll reach the top 'fore long. Then we'll see what's on the other side, and when we climb down, we can just run around on the level ground, and tell the folks where we've been, and what a climb we had!"

"Oh, yes," agreed Gwen, and once more they pushed forward, and up toward the summit, that seemed, no matter how long they climbed, to be not the least bit nearer.

For a time they climbed in silence, when, all at once, Gwen tripped over a loose root, and promptly sat down.

"I'll have to rest a few minutes," she said.

"I'll sit down because you do," Max said. He would not say that he, too, was tired.

He was not contented long to sit resting, and soon the two were once more trudging up the steep incline, Max leading the way, and Gwen, following close behind him.

"We're 'most to the top," he said, at last, to which Gwen replied:

"I don't believe it! The more we climb, the farther away it seems, and I do believe that horrid old hilltop moves away as fast as it sees us coming!"

"Now, Gwen, you know better! Just look!" Max said, and Gwen looked.

"Well,—the top isn't any farther off than it was the last time I looked up," she said, grudgingly.

She knew that it looked nearer, but she could not bear to say that.

"It's nearer, and you know it!" Max declared, stoutly. "Come on!"

"Wait till I fix my shoe," wailed Gwen.

"I'll bet that's the tenth time you've stopped to pull your shoe off since we started to climb this hill," Max cried in disgust.

Gwen was about to say that she should stop again if she wished to, but a glance at Max caused her to change her mind. His face was far from pleasing, so without a word, she fastened her shoe, and silently the two tramped on.

Max was wishing that he had taken the trip alone.

Gwen heartily wished that she had remained on the beach.

She was not only tired, but her feet were sore and blistered.

Max walked ahead, and Gwen found it hard work to keep up.

"Oh, Max!" she cried at last, "Do wait for me!" but Max either did not hear, or hearing, refused to wait, and Gwen, unable to take another step, sank down on the coarse grass and burst into tears.

[87]

CHAPTER V

ToC

WHAT MAX FOUND

Gwen was very angry. Max had taken her on the long tramp, and now had become impatient because she was tired, and had left her to choose between immediately following him, or lagging behind.

It was almost twilight, but Gwen was forced to rest for a few moments, at least, before taking another step.

"P'r'aps I can run, and catch up with Max, if I sit here and rest a while," she said.

Max, careless boy that he was, walked straight ahead, not even turning to look back, to learn if Gwen were following.

Gwen watched his sturdy little figure as it stood out against the sky, and envied him because he seemed not the least bit weary, while Max, sure that she was watching, took extra long steps to show what a vigorous fellow he was.

[88]

When he had reached the top of the hill, he would have been glad to rest, but he wished to prove that he was tireless, so he at once commenced to make his way across the level plain upon which he found himself, and then to descend the rugged hillside.

Sometimes a twig snapped overhead, and then he would next be surprised by stepping upon what proved to be a rolling stone, that would slip from under his foot, and go rattling on ahead of him.

The long walk down the far side of the hill was less cheerful than the upward climb had been, and while he would not for the world have admitted it, he missed Gwen, and her constant chatter.

[89]

He was beginning to feel tired, and he would have been glad to sit down and rest, but lest Gwen should be on her way to overtake him, and laugh at him for resting, he kept on.

Once he looked over his shoulder hoping to see that she was now following, but she was not in sight, and again he pushed forward. Not a bit cared he if Gwen were afraid.

"If she'd kept up with me, she needn't have been afraid. Nothing would scare her if I— Oh—oo—oo!"

With a frightened yell, he tripped over what appeared to be a long bundle, which, however, proved to be the legs of a sleeping tramp.

"Ye little varmint! Walkin' all over a man! I'd serve ye right if I tied yer arms an' legs tergether, and pitched yer down inter the valley beyant there!" howled the angry man, as he turned over for another nap.

[90]

Max, believing that the man was chasing him, raced down the steep hillside, stumbling over roots, and twigs that lay in his way, sliding on rolling stones, and catching at low hanging branches to save himself, he at last, from weariness, stumbled, and fell sprawling over a stump that the darkness had hidden.

It happened that Gwen, becoming a bit timid because of the shadows of twilight, had risen stiffly from her seat on a low rock, and was hastening after Max, when she heard the boy's shout, and then the angry words of the tramp, and quickly as she had come, she ran back to her perch upon the rock.

[91]



"Now, indeed, she was afraid."

Now, indeed, she was afraid. Alone on a wooded hilltop! Would she have to stay there all night? Would some one come for her? How would they know where she was?

She tried to think that Max, on reaching the house would tell of her plight, and urge someone to come for her, but she knew that Max was a coward, and that he never liked to tell anything that might cause others to blame him.

Meanwhile the tramp slept soundly. No thought of the frightened boy troubled his dreams, and of the little girl who had drawn back into the shadow of the trees, he knew nothing.

At the big yellow house on the Cliff, there was great excitement. Mrs. Harcourt was so nearly frantic that the best efforts of her friends failed to comfort her.

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Earlier in the day she had gaily laughed at Gwen's absence at the noon meal, and if she was at all disturbed because of her sailing trip in the leaky cement tub, she did not show it.

But that twilight should be hanging over the sea, and night fast approaching, and Gwen out of sight for the second time was really enough to frighten any woman, even if she were far less nervous than Mrs. Harcourt.

A searching party was formed, not one of whom had the slightest idea where to look, when, just as the men were about to start out, a small boy appeared in the driveway; a boy who seemed to wish to be unnoticed.

"Hello! I say, Max! You usually know where the little Harcourt girl is. Do you know now?" said a little man on the outside of the group.

[93]

"Le'me go!" snarled Max, "I want some supper," and he tried to squirm out of the firm grasp of the little man's hand.

"Not till you've answered," said a tall, athletic fellow.

"Come now, little chap, speak up!" Mrs. Deland, faultless dressed now appeared.

"Oh, it is really absurd to think my little son has the least idea where——"

"It may be, Madam," the young man replied, "but I'll just ask him again, and we'll see how he answers. Say, Max! Do you say you don't know where she is?"

"I don't know where she is just now," the boy answered sullenly.

"Did you know a little while ago?"

"Oh, dear! Max is so sensitive. This sort of thing will quite upset him I'm sure," said

[94]

Mrs. Deland.

The tall young man made no reply, but to Max he said:

"Tell us where she is, and we'll go and get her, but if you won't tell us, we'll take you along to show us the way. Which will you do?"

More tired than he would have cared to admit, Max dared not refuse to tell, for he had no desire to repeat the fearfully long walk that he had taken.

And when he told how little Gwen had declared herself unable to follow him, the disgust of his listeners was complete.

"So as the small girl was tired out with the long trip on which you had taken her, you left her to be a little tenant of the lonely wooded hilltop for the night!"

"A brave act, truly. Your mother must be proud of such a manly boy!" said a stout man who had joined the group. [95]

"I told her to come along, and I guess she could have if she'd wanted to," Max said stolidly.

In disgust, and without another word to the boy or his mother, the group, with one accord, turned toward the sandy road that led toward the narrow path up the steep hillside.

They were sturdy men, well used to long tramps over rugged paths, and soon they came upon Gwen, huddled close against a high ledge, in an effort to keep warm.

She had been too frightened to cry. She had heard the angry shout of the tramp when Max had stumbled over him, and now, although he had not uttered a word since, nor had she heard a footstep, she trembled and constantly looked about her to learn if he were approaching. [96]

As the searchers made their way toward the crest of the hill, the dry twigs that lay upon the ground broke under their feet, and the underbrush snapped as they pushed the low branches back. As they approached the rock where Gwen was sitting, she heard their voices, and believing that instead of one tramp, an entire band of tramps was coming toward her, she screamed with fright, and slipping from the rock, cowered on the grass, trying to make herself as small as possible.

They had heard her outcry, however, and now they called her name.

"Gwen! Little Gwen! Where are you? We've come to find you!"

Crying out to them, she hurried forward, her arms outstretched, as she stumbled over the rough, coarse grass, over roots, and dry sticks that lay in her path, until, in the effort to run, she pitched and would have fallen, had not the big man of the party caught her, and swung her to a safe place upon his shoulder. [97]

For once Gwen was truly grateful, and closely she clung about the big man's neck, so glad was she, that he and his friends had clambered up to her lonely perch on the big rock at the summit of the hill.

Once she whispered in his ear. "There was a big, horrid tramp up on that hill. I know, because I heard him shout at Max. I wonder if he hurt Max, and I wonder where Max is now. Did some other men go hunting for him, just as you hunted for me?"

"No need of hunting for Max," the big man replied, "for he took good care of himself, and came sneaking home, safe and sound, while he left you, little girl, to look out for yourself as well as you could." [98]

With care they made their way down the rugged hillside, and Gwen was so happy that she sang snatches of songs, and someone in the rear whistled to keep her company.

Arrived at the house, Gwen had a fine welcome.

She was not generally liked, because of her pert, saucy ways, but the fact that she had been lost, and now had returned was surely a reason for rejoicing.

"Where's Max?" queried a young man who had been one of the searchers.

"The dear boy was so tired with his tramp that he asked to go at once to bed. He was really fatigued, for usually he coaxes to remain up," Mrs. Deland said, "and really," she continued, "the only reason that he did not take Gwen along with him was because she said that she *must* rest a while." [99]

"I suppose it was impossible for him to wait with her," said someone in the crowd.

"Max is very tender hearted," Mrs. Deland responded, "and he said he thought if he waited, she might start before she was sufficiently rested."

With much dignity, Mrs. Deland turned from the piazza, and entered the house. She knew that Max was at fault, and that everyone in the group thought so.

She would not acknowledge that her little son could be in the wrong. Max, according to her ideas, should be praised, and approved of at all times.

Gwen was the center of interest, and that pleased her greatly. Mrs. Harcourt was delighted, fairly beamed upon those who crowded around her small daughter, to ask all about her long tramp and how it seemed to be alone on the wooded hilltop.

[100]

Of course the story lost nothing in the telling.

Gwen made it really thrilling, but after a time, even her mother felt that the tale was becoming rather lurid for a strictly truthful account, and she dragged Gwen away to the hall, and up the stairway, but she made herself absurd.

"Really, Gwen, you should be a bit careful," she said, as gently as if afraid of offending her small girl. "If your wonderful imagination made you think you saw eyes peering at you from behind those tree-trunks, you should remember that common people might not believe you. Ordinary people could not understand."

[101]

"I don't care if they don't!" Gwen said stoutly. "I shall tell what I want to, and they can believe it or not, just as they choose."

"I surely am the mother of a genius," murmured the silly woman.

A few days later, great excitement prevailed among the children of the Summer colony at Cliffmore, and their elders were sufficiently interested to talk of the news on the piazza, the beach, the little park, at breakfast, at lunch, and at dinner.

"It is really to be quite an affair," said one lady, to which her friend replied:

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, for I heard that no expense had been spared, and that the whole thing will be as beautiful as a dream."

"Who planned it, or who is managing it?" questioned another, to which yet another who now joined the group replied:

[102]

"Captain Atherton is 'backing' it, I hear, and so, of course, Rose will be the central figure in the pageant."

Yes, that was the cause of the excitement. There was to be a grand pageant, and the children would be the principal actors.

"Is Gwen Harcourt to be in the pageant?" someone asked, but before anyone could reply Mrs. Harcourt joined them.

"Is my little Gwen to be in it? Why, what a question!" she said. "They would hardly have a pageant without her."

"I suppose not," someone said, in a tone of disgust, but Mrs. Harcourt did not notice that.

"Well, no," she responded. "I hardly think they could, because beside the part that Gwen will actually take, she will be a great help in other ways. Her ideas are so original, and she is always so willing to tell others how things should be done, that she, really, is a wonderful help. The committee arranging the pageant constantly ask her advice."

[103]

"I wonder if they asked Gwen's permission to have the pageant at all?" grumbled a small boy who stood near the ladies who had been talking.

Yes, it was to be a great event at Cliffmore, and everyone was interested.

"What are you going to be, and what are you going to wear?" were the questions oftenest asked, and groups of merry, laughing children sat chatting on the piazzas, or strolling along the beach, talking, always talking of the pageant.

It was, indeed, to be a grand and beautiful procession that would make its way along the beach.

[104]

The children were greatly excited, and each was interested in the costumes that her playmates were intending to wear, as well as that in which she would herself appear.

There had been an odd happening. Captain Atherton had chosen the list of characters to be represented, and Mrs. Sherwood had written a clear description of the costumes to be worn.

All were pleased with the parts assigned them, save Gwen Harcourt and Max Deland.

"I shall not be one of the mermaids," Gwen had boldly declared. "If I can't be the Water Queen, I'll not be a water fairy at all!"

"Very well," Captain Atherton had said quietly, "I will find someone to take your place."

[105]

Gwen was surprised. She had felt sure that Captain Atherton would beg her to remain, and that he would also give to her the part of the Water Queen.

Max had had a similar experience. He had expressed his dislike for the part given him, and had been told that the parts once given out could not be changed.

"Come on, Gwen!" he had said. "We can get up something for ourselves!"

"What *do* you mean?" she asked.

"Come on over to the big lodge, and I'll tell you. We'll have fun enough. You'll see!"

[106]

CHAPTER VI

ToC

THE SEA KING'S NYMPHS

Everyone, everything was ready for the grand carnival and pageant.

The children were more than ready. They were eager.

Their costumes were completed, and they knew exactly how they were expected to pose, so that each should do her part to make the procession beautiful.

Even the sun seemed intent upon doing his share, and as he rose from the water, appeared to be smiling upon sea and land.

At the far end of the beach was a huge canvas tent, and all of the "trappings," or "properties" were stored beneath its shelter. From this tent the procession would start, and pass along the beach, where hundreds of spectators would be watching from the tiers of seats that had been erected along the route.

[107]

Princess Polly, Rose, and Sprite stood waiting to take their places.

"What do you suppose Gwen and Max meant?" Polly asked.

"When they said they'd get up something of their own?" said Rose.

"Why, yes," Polly said. "Don't you remember how they spoke?"

"Oh, yes, I know," Rose replied, "but Gwen and Max often say they'll do things, and then they don't do at all as they say they will. They speak like that when they're provoked, and then they forget all about it."

"Do you know," Sprite said, "I think this time they'll remember what they said, and I'm just wondering what they will do."

[108]

A trumpet called the children to order, and soon all was bustle and excitement.

Then when all were ready, the long line of lovely children attired in rainbow hues, with here and there an adult figure to add dignity to the pageant, slowly made its way along the beach, receiving cheers and applause from the delighted on-lookers.

First came a group of thirty of the village children, dressed as water sprites, and blowing on soft-toned silver horns.

Their tunics were pale rose, and their cheeks were as pink as their draperies.

Gilded sandals were on their feet, and they blew their silvery notes with a will.

Following the water sprites, came a troop of small boys tripping along, and dressed as little mermen, their green scales glittering in the warm sunlight, their caps of braided seaweed bordered with tiny scallop shells.

[109]

They carried triangles, and gaily they marked the time, laughing as they tramped along.

There were floats upon which were grouped children and grown-ups in tableaux representing historical events.

There was a tall may-pole carried by a man dressed as a jester, and boys and girls in early English peasant costumes held the ends of the long fluttering ribbons, laughing as the crowd applauded.

Group after group passed along, and one that called forth loud cheering was composed of boys and girls dressed as little farmers and their chubby wives.

The small boys wore overalls and straw hats, the girls wore pink sunbonnets, pink gowns, and blue aprons, but both boys and girls carried rakes on their shoulders, and gay companions they seemed to be.

[110]

The greatest delight, the loudest cheering greeted the great gilded chariot, drawn by six white horses hired for the occasion by Captain Atherton.

Each steed boasted a white harness, and from the head of each floated streamers of green ribbon.

Who would ever have dreamed that the imposing Sea King who stood so proudly in his chariot firmly grasping the reins, was none other than Captain Seaford, the father of little Sprite.

A white wig and beard had changed him completely, and his costume of sea-green draperies was most becoming.

In his left hand he carried a gilded trident.

In the chariot with him as his nymphs were Princess Polly, in pink, Rose Atherton in blue, and little Sprite in yellow, three charming nymphs, surely. [111]

Brownies, elves, gnomes, a crowd of small boys dressed to represent any number of different kinds of fishes were followed by girls among whom might be seen Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and a host of other fairy tale heroines.

There were little hunters, and fishermen, but all agreed that the Sea King with his nymphs, his chariot and his fine horses was best of all.

Polly, Rose, and Sprite were just saying that Gwen and Max had kept out of sight in spite of their declaration that they would be in the procession, in costumes of their own choosing, when Polly happened to turn, and look back.

"Oo—oo—oo! Look!" she cried, and Rose and Sprite, and even the stately Sea King turned to learn what had startled her. [112]

Too surprised to speak, they watched a little team with two occupants, approaching at headlong speed.

A smart cart drawn by a gray donkey came tearing down the beach. Max dressed as a farmer, with blue overalls and straw hat, was making a desperate effort to control the donkey, while Gwen in a chintz frock and pink sunbonnet sat close beside him, clinging to her seat in abject fear.

Evidently they had been late in getting started, and had endeavored to gain sufficient speed to "catch up" with the procession.

Max had been vexed that at first the balky little beast could not be induced to hasten, and for a long time he continued to walk at a fearfully slow pace, paying no heed to shouting, or a taste of the whip. [113]

Then, when Max put down the whip, and let the reins lie loosely across the little creature's back, Neddy suddenly decided to go, and go he did, galloping along at a rate that set the light cart swaying from side to side, and threatening, at any moment, to throw Max and Gwen out.

"Stop him! Do stop him!" cried Gwen, "He's running away!"

"I *cant!*" screamed Max. "First he wouldn't go, and now he won't stop!"

The procession halted, and a big boy sprang forward, endeavoring to snatch at the bridle.

The intention was good, but the donkey, maddened that anyone should try to stop him, shied, and the boy and girl were hurled out upon the sand. [114]

Max turned a complete somersault and came up on his feet, declaring himself unhurt, but Gwen took an entirely different view of the matter.

She was not hurt, but her temper was decidedly ruffled.

"Well, I declare!" she cried, "I do think everyone is horrid, but I think Max is just a *little* horrider than the rest!"

"Why, Gwen, he did his best to stop, but the donkey just wouldn't," said Sprite.

"Well, I wouldn't have been spilled if I hadn't been riding with Max, would I?" cried Gwen. "Something always happens when I go anywhere with Max. Funny I don't ever remember it. Just as soon as something's happened, away I go somewhere else with him."

Gwen could not imagine why they all laughed. [115]

Meanwhile the donkey having run as far as he cared to, stood far down the beach, looking out across the waves, as calmly as if he could stand there for hours. Indeed one could hardly think that he was the same little beast that, a short time before, had bolted so furiously.

Captain Atherton, who had left the crowd, and quietly followed Neddy, now quickly approached him. He made no attempt to escape, but instead, allowed himself to be led as gently as if he really preferred to go that way.

Very meek he looked, as with the Captain's firm hand on the bridle, he approached the crowd that had watched him when he ran wildly along the beach.

Max was more than willing to clamber into the cart, and for the remainder of the route, be a part of the procession. Gwen, first flatly refused to ride, but after much [116]

coaxing she finally consented, and took her place beside Max, and so odd was the expression of her face that Max afterward said that he could not tell whether she was "mad or scared."

"Half mad and half scared," Gwen replied. "Mad to have to ride again with you, and scared for fear Neddy would run away again."

The donkey behaved very well, however. He had run all he cared to for one while, and he walked along behind the Sea King's chariot, as quietly as if he had never once dreamed of running away.

After a while, Gwen began to be so glad that she was indeed, in the pageant, that she looked about her, and actually smiled when some of the other children spoke to her. [117]

At the end of the route, a fine lunch was served in a pavilion that looked out on the beach.

Captain Atherton had provided it, and it was heartily enjoyed by all who had taken part in the pageant, as well their friends who were also invited.

After the good things had been partaken of, the little guests danced to the music furnished by an orchestra that had been playing during the feasting, and eyes sparkled, and cheeks grew rosy with excitement.

It had been a delightful day, and for days afterward the children and those who had been spectators, talked of the lovely pageant, that had made its glittering way along the beach.

Captain Seaford sat just outside the door of his house, mending a net, or rather, attempting to mend it, for his mind was not upon his work, and from time to time he let the net lie on his knees, while he looked out across the dancing waves as he was hoping to see a vessel appear on the horizon. [118]

He would sit thus for a time, and then shake his head and resume his work.

A dancing, springing footstep brought Sprite to the door, and as soon as she saw how eagerly he scanned the sea, she crept softly toward him, and laying her hand upon his shoulder, peeped around into his eyes.

"What you thinking of, Pa?" she asked quickly.

"Nothing much little girl," he said gently.

She lifted her fore-finger, nodding wisely as she spoke. [119]

"It might not be much," she said, "but it's enough so you worry about it. Tell me, Pa, what's vexing you."

After a moment in which both were silent, she spoke again, but with her soft little arms about his neck.

"Was it about Ma, or me you were thinking?" she asked. "You looked so sober, that I know it was about someone that you cared for."

"I was thinking of you both, Sprite," he said, as he drew her closer, "and of the vessel that is almost a week overdue. If she comes in, the venture that I made on her cargo, will bring what some folks would call a small sum of money, but to us, it would be a small fortune."

"A week overdue! I'm not so selfish that I don't give a thought for those on board that have perished if she's lost. That's simply doubled the worry." [120]

A warm tear fell on his rough hand, and he looked up quickly.

"Tut, tut! Little Sprite! Don't cry yet. It may be that she's only delayed, and will sail into port, with all hands on board and her cargo safe. You're too young to worry now. Cheer up! Pa's not really worrying yet, only wondering, little Sprite, wondering."

That would have settled the matter for some children, but Sprite saw more clearly, thought more deeply than does the average child, and she knew that he was trying to cheer and comfort her while at heart he was deeply concerned, for the fate of the vessel for which he had been eagerly waiting.

"But she could come in now and be all right, couldn't she?" Sprite asked. "Or is it so late that you almost know that something has happened to her?" [121]

"No, no, Sprite. It's not too late for her to arrive safe and sound, but as the days pass I catch myself watching a bit closer for her coming. Why did the tears come, Sprite? I never like to have you grieving, dear."

"The tears always come if I think anything has disappointed you, or Ma," Sprite said, softly. "That's why I tried so hard to win the prize last Spring, when all the other pupils were working for it, too. I didn't care half so much about getting it for myself, as for you."

He drew her yet closer.

"Dear little Sprite," he said.

"And now I'm going to hope that the vessel will come sailing in with a big load of luck on board. I'll tell you one thing; I saw the moon over my right shoulder last night, and all the sailors say that's lucky."

Captain Seaford laughed at this bit of superstition offered to him as a crumb of comfort.

She laughed with him, and stooping, picked up a small star fish.

"I'll toss this up three times. If it comes down on the sand, twice out of three times right side up, it will be the same as saying that the vessel is safe, and will return all right."

Three times she tossed it up, only a few inches from the sand lest it break.

"Once! Right side up!" she cried, a rippling laugh following her words.

"Twice! Wrong side up! Oh, Pa, which will it be next time?"

A moment she stood irresolute as if half fearing to test their luck the third time. She turned the star fish over and over in her hand, then, as if she thought waiting useless, she tossed it lightly up.

[123]

"Oo—oo! Look! Look Pa!" she cried, "It's right side up! Pa, I do believe the vessel will come in safely. My! Wouldn't it have been awful if the star fish had fallen the other side up?"

"My little Sprite is a great comfort," he said, "and the tossing of the star fish is harmless fun, but I'd not like to think that you'd believe all the superstitious yarns that the sailors tell."

"Oh, no," was the earnest reply. "I know that some of them could not be true, but there's one funny one that a sailor down on the pier told yesterday."

"He said you could go down stairs backwards after dark, and look into a mirror you held in your hand, and see something, I don't know what, but I'm going to try it. I'll try it just to know what I'd see, or to find out what would happen. He said something was sure, just *sure* to happen."

[124]

"The something that would happen would be that you'd fall, and perhaps break your pretty neck," Captain Seaford said, "but as to what you'd see in the glass! Why, that is all nonsense. Here and there is a sailor that's as full of such silly notions as a weather vane."

"That sort of sailor listens to all the yarns he hears, believes them all, tells them all, and generally he isn't any too careful to tell them just as he heard them."

"He's apt to add just a little of his own nonsense to the yarn he heard to make it interesting."

[125]

CHAPTER VII

ToC

A WEDDING AT CLIFFMORE

The playmates who were at Cliffmore for the Summer were having a delightful time, but in a quiet way, John Gifford, or "Gyp," as he was still called, was very happy, and also very busy.

At the end of the school year in June, he had stood at the head of his class, and now, employed by Captain Atherton, he knew that he was respected, and that he had honestly earned that respect.

"I'm to be the hired 'man' on his place," he said, "so I'll be earning something, while I study evenings, for I mean to get somewhere worth while. I don't mind if anyone in Avondale who likes me, calls me "Gyp." It sounds friendly, but I'll not always be known as Gyp, the gypsy boy. When I get out in the world I'll be John Gifford, and I mean business. I don't know yet just what I'll do, but Captain Atherton will advise me, and with his help, I'll be able to decide."

[126]

Of course there were a few who continued to shake their heads, and say that "A gypsy is always a gypsy, and what can you expect of a boy brought up, or rather permitted to grow up, as Gyp has been?"

The larger number of the people of Avondale seemed determined to take a more cheerful view of it, and to believe in the boy, even as he now seemed to believe in

himself.

Gyp proved that he needed no watching, for he commenced work early each day, and never stopped until night.

The lawn was carefully clipped, the flowers and lawn were given an abundance of water, vines were trained, and shrubs were trimmed, until after a month of Gyp's care, the place looked finer than ever before. [127]

Captain Atherton left Cliffmore one day to visit Avondale, and get some papers that he remembered having left in his safe.

As he walked up the path he noticed what fine care the place had received during his absence. The lawn had never looked so green, the plants and shrubs had never blossomed so freely.

As he stood looking about him the click of the lawn mower caused him to turn just as Gyp came around the corner of the house.

"You've worked wonders here, Gyp," the Captain said. "I always had a fairly good lawn, and much could be said of the vines and the flowers, but everything looks far better than it ever did before. Where did you get the knowledge to do the work so well, and so successfully?" [128]

"I asked the gardener down in the Center, the one who takes care of the parks, to tell me how to do my best for you, and then—I did it," Gyp said, simply.

"Work like that at whatever you undertake, and you'll be pretty sure to achieve success," said Captain Atherton.

"I mean to," Gyp replied, firmly, and as he looked after the fine figure ascending the steps to the porch he murmured:

"I'll do my very best for him," while Captain John Atherton said, as he opened the door of his safe to take out the papers that he needed: "That boy is worth helping, and I'll help him."

With the genial Captain away, the housekeeper felt free to enjoy a bit of gossip, and seeing the cook in the garden of the next house, she slipped out of the rear door, and across the lawn, where, that her coming might look like a mere happening, she took a bit of paper from her pocket, and commenced scribbling upon it. [129]

She wished the cook in the next garden to think that she was jotting down a few things that she wished to remember.

Curiosity was at once aroused, and the cook moved toward the hedge.

"E'hem!" she coughed softly.

The housekeeper turned coolly.

"Oh, good morning," she said. "I just come out here for a bit of a rest, there's so much going on just now, that I'm nearly wild with the planning."

"Do tell!" cried the cook. "I've heard there was to be great doings of some sort over at 'The Cliffs,' but I haven't yet heard what it is. What's it all about? I'm wild to know." [130]

Mrs. Wilton sighed, as if she were already very weary.

"We're not more than half ready for the great event," she said, "but Captain Atherton does not wish me to tell anyone the least thing about it."

"Mercy sakes! Why I came out purpose to hear!" said the cook, her round face very red, and her little eyes snapping.

"Well, you'll hear later," Mrs. Wilton said, and turning, she walked across the lawn and entered the house.

Inside the door she whispered:

"There! I guess that paid her for being so private that she wouldn't tell me a thing about the company that left their house in such a hurry one day last week, and hustled off before daylight at that!" [131]

The cook, still standing with her fat arms akimbo, stared wrathfully at the closed door where the housekeeper had vanished.

"Well, of all the mean things not even telling a decent woman like myself one bit of what's going on there! I'll find out, though, some way. To-morrow is my afternoon off, and I'll go from one end of this town to the other to see what I can hear."

Even little Rose Atherton was pledged to keep the secret.

"We're to have a lovely time at our house," she said to Polly and Sprite, one morning. "We're to have a perfectly lovely time, and you'll be there to enjoy it, but that is all I can tell. Uncle John said I could say that if I wished to but that I musn't tell any more just now." [132]

"Well, we won't mind waiting to hear just what it is," Polly said, "because we know it will be nice, whatever sort of party it is. We always have a nice time at your

house."

"And we'll like it all the better because there's to be a surprise of some sort," said Sprite.

"We can wonder and wonder, and then when the day comes we'll have the fun of not guessing what it is, but just knowing what it is and enjoying it."

Rose looked very wise.

"It's to be lovely, I told you that, and there's one thing more I can tell, and that is that it will be different from any party we ever went to, or any party any of us ever had."

"Won't we be glad when we haven't to wait any longer to know just what kind of a party it is?" said Sprite. [133]

"Oh, yes," agreed Princess Polly, "and so will ever so many other people, for I've heard people talking about it, and saying that they were tired of guessing, and that they wished they knew now, instead of having to wait still longer to know."

"It won't be very long now before they know," Rose said, laughing gaily.

The secret was out, because the invitations were out.

Captain John Atherton, the genial master of the beautiful home at Cliffmore, known as "The Cliffs," and of an equally beautiful estate at Avondale, was to marry the girl whom he had always faithfully loved.

The misunderstanding that had parted them had come about because of the loss of a miniature of the girl, Iris Vandmere. [134]

Its loss had grieved John Atherton.

He could not imagine how it could have so completely vanished. In truth, it had been stolen, but Iris thought that her lover must have valued it lightly, believing if he had properly guarded it, it could not have been taken from him. One word had led to another, and she had sent him away, grieving and wretched.

Her own heart was not less sad, but she had endeavored to hide that. Then, on that lucky day of the Summer before, Princess Polly had found the exquisite miniature lying in the middle of the sandy road.

How it came to be there, no one could say. Evidently someone, perhaps, the one who had stolen it, had dropped it, and travelled on, unaware that the famous miniature lay waiting a claimant, on the main road of Cliffmore. [135]

The Summer colony was excited, but of all those who were invited to be present, none were more lovingly interested than the children.

John Atherton loved the children, and they dearly loved him.

One would have thought that the grand old house of the Vandmere's would have been chosen for the wedding, but Iris was quite alone there, save for her servants.

Both parents had but recently passed away, and the lonely girl felt that the home with its sad memories was not at all the place for the happy event.

"Let it be at Cliffmore," she had said, and at Cliffmore it was to be.

"Only think of it," Princess Polly said one morning, "Rose is to be maid of honor, and Sprite and I are to be bridesmaids. Rose is to wear pink, with pink roses, and we shall wear white with pink roses. Miss Iris will wear white, because brides always wear white. Mamma, why can't brides sometimes wear something else?" [136]

Mrs. Sherwood laughed.

"This time the bride will wear 'something else.' Miss Vandmere's gown will be of the palest blue satin, and beautiful lace," she said.

"Oh, how lovely!" cried Princess Polly.

At last the great day arrived, just as the children felt that they could not wait much longer.

It was like a dream of Fairyland, for the great gardens at "The Cliffs" had never looked finer, the rooms were bowers of flowers and foliage, soft music floated through the halls, and then, Iris in shimmering blue satin, attended by her dainty little maids, came forward to the floral arch, where handsome Captain Atherton stood waiting. [137]

After the ceremony, the guests moved forward to kiss the lovely bride, and Iris, bent to give her first kiss to her little maid of honor.

"You are *my* little Rose, now," she whispered, and Rose, happy Rose, clasped her arms about her soft, white neck.

And quite as the weddings in the old fairy tales it was, for the banquet was like an old time feast, and dancing, in which the Captain and his bride took part, followed.

When, after a gay, brilliant evening, the happy pair said "good-bye," their friends gathered about them, wishing them a pleasant voyage on the *Dolphin*, a safe return, and all good fortune.

[138]

Never a thought of loneliness had little Rose. During Uncle John's absence, she was to be with her dear Princess Polly, and what could be better than that?

For a few more weeks they would be at the shore, and Rose would be at the Sherwood's cottage, at play all day with Princess Polly and Sprite.

Then she would leave Cliffmore with the Sherwoods, and go with them to Avondale, there to remain until, upon his return, Uncle John, and the lovely, new Aunt Iris, should come for her. Rose was delighted to stay with Princess Polly, and she looked forward to her home with Uncle John, now to be even pleasanter than before, because of the sweet, new relative, whom she already loved.

The day after the wedding, Gwen decided to go over to "The Cliffs" to learn if Rose were there, and if she were so lucky as to find her, to remain and play with her. It would be a fine way to spend the morning.

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She had quarreled with Max.

She was always either vexed with him or just making up, and no one could ever guess which had happened, because Gwen looked quite as cheerful after a disagreement, as when the friendship had been renewed.

She hurried along the beach, rushing past a group of small girls whom she often played with, because she meant surely to find Rose before she might leave "The Cliffs" to go over to Princess Polly's house.

She knew that the walk would be a long one, yet it seemed farther than she thought.

The sun was hot, and the sand seemed burning under the thin soles of her dainty shoes.

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"How long it takes me to get there!" she said impatiently. "I couldn't run all the way."

She reached the low gate a few minutes later, however, and opening it, swung it wide between the two stone posts, and ran up the path, laughing when the gate swung to with a clang of its iron latch.

Mrs. Wilton, the housekeeper, opened the door, believing that some important person had arrived, for the bell had rung as if the opening of the door were imperative.

She was not pleased to see the small girl standing there.

"No, Rose is not here," she said in answer to Gwen's question. "She is to stay with Polly while her Uncle John is away. She went over there this morning."

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"Why this is 'this morning'," Gwen said, pertly.

"It is ten o'clock, and Rose went over to the Sherwood house at eight," the housekeeper said, at the same time stepping back, as if she intended to close the door.

She was free to close it as soon as she chose, for Gwen had turned, and without a word or a glance, raced down the path, out of the gateway and up the beach to join Rose and Polly whom she now saw standing and talking.

"Hello!" she cried, as she drew nearer. "I've been over to 'The Cliffs' to find you, Rose, and then I came here. What you two talking about?"

"Trying to choose what to play," Rose said.

Both wished that Gwen had remained away, but they could not be rude, so she of course would join in the game, whatever it might be. It was a warm morning, and Princess Polly was just thinking that it would be fine to choose a shady spot, and sit there telling fairy tales, but Gwen's arrival made that impossible.

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She never cared to listen while someone told a story. To be happy she must be the story teller, and as her stories were always wildly improbable, and always about her silly little self, they were never at all interesting.

For that matter, she was never willing to join in any game unless it was very exciting.

Several games were suggested by Rose and Polly, but to all Gwen shook her head, and refused to play either one of them.

One she thought too stupid, another she declared that she had never liked, and, yet another was "awfully dull" she said.

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At last Rose lost patience.

"What *will* you play?" she asked sharply, her cheeks flushing.

"Oh, I don't know," Gwen replied carelessly. "I guess I won't play at all, anyway not with you two. I'll run back and find Max Deland. He's good fun, and he'll surely be able to think of something I'll like to play. He most always does, and I like him because he is wide awake. Good-bye!" and she was off like a flash down the beach.

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CHAPTER VIII

ToC

AUNT ROSE CALLS

There had been many sunny days with blue skies, and never a cloud in sight, when one day, to the surprise of everyone, the sky appeared to be a solid mass of dark, leaden clouds, and the sea that for such a long time had been glistening and sparkling, now showed only a dark sullen surface, with here and there a whitecap to break its monotony.

Rose and Polly had decided to remain indoors, and all the afternoon they had been busy sorting the shells that they had been collecting.

"I wish I had more of these," said Polly, pointing to a little heap of oddly shaped shells, white in color, with here and there markings of soft brown.

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"I wish so too," Rose said. "We've less of that kind than we have of any of the others. I wonder how it happened that we didn't get more of those?"

"I don't know, but if it is pleasant to-morrow, let's hunt for some," said Polly.

Mrs. Sherwood called, and Polly putting the tray full of shells upon the table, went out across the hall to reply.

Rose hurried down stairs to the hall, out onto the piazza, along the flower bordered path to the gate, then out and off down the beach.

Polly never liked to be out when the sky was cloudy and the wind raw, but Rose cared not a bit, and she had gone out thinking to give Polly a surprise.

She meant to find some of the coveted shells, and run home with them before Polly should have missed her.

[146]

She looked back at the Sherwood cottage. How pretty it was, and quite like a country house with its well kept lawn, its flowers in the gardens, and even at the gate, a rose vine clambering over.

Swiftly she ran along the beach to a spot where usually they had found the most shells.

A few there were, but none like those that Polly wanted, and she trudged along, looking sharply at every shell that lay imbedded in the hard, wet sand, from which the tide had receded.

She had been gone nearly an hour although she did not dream that it was so long since she had left the house.

She had known that Polly would not follow her, because of the cold wind that was blowing so briskly. A rift in the clouds had let the sunlight through, and when she reached the gate, the garden was bathed in sunlight.

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Rose paused for a moment to look at the flowers, now gay in the bright sunshine, when the sound of voices came toward her, and while one was the pleasant voice of Mrs. Sherwood, the other was surely the voice of—Great Aunt Rose!

"Captain Atherton asked that Rose might remain with us while he is away," Rose heard Mrs. Sherwood say to which the cold voice of Great Aunt Rose replied sternly:

"Well, and if he did, I see no reason why she can not spend a part of the time with me at the old Atherton house which I have always felt was her proper home."

Little Rose Atherton's heart beat faster. She still stood at the gate, and she wondered that, for a moment, neither spoke.

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Then Great Aunt Rose broke the silence.

"I was away at the time of the wedding, but had I been present, I should have at that time *insisted* that the Captain leave her with me, not only during his cruise on the *Dolphin*, but after his return.

"The young woman whom he has married is a beauty, and so of course, will be too full of dress and society to have any interest in little Rose. If John has chosen to wed a flighty beauty, he should at least give Rose to me."

"Miss Vandmere is indeed beautiful to look at, but she is lovely in character as well, and I know that she loves Rose," Mrs. Sherwood said quietly.

She would not argue, but she felt that, in justice she must give utterance to the fine regard in which she held Iris Vandmere.

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"She still stood at the gate."

"There are, I suppose, some beauties who are neither vain nor foolish, but however that may be, I am determined to see Rose to-day, and to ask her if she does not wish to return with me."

At these words uttered in a shrill, angry voice, Rose turned and raced down the beach.

She dropped the shells that she had been tightly holding, and without a thought of recovering them, she ran at top speed, as if, at that very moment stately Great Aunt Rose had been actually chasing her.

She had no idea how far she had run, she had not paused for even a second, nor had she once looked back. Now as she looked up, she saw a narrow side street that commenced at the shore, but well up from the water, and ran toward the center of the little village.

[150]

She was almost breathless as she turned into the little street, but she dared not stop running.

The very thought of ever returning to the stately old Atherton house, with its great dark halls, its formal drawing-room, and for companion, gentle Aunt Lois, kind but so deaf that it was almost impossible to talk with her, and cold, dignified, haughty Great Aunt Rose, filled little Rose with terror.

She was now completely tired out, and as she turned the corner of the next street, she stumbled, and would have fallen but for two strong arms that caught her. She looked up.

"Why little Rose!"

"Oh, Aunt Judith! Dear Aunt Judith, take me home with you now, right off, this very minute!" cried Rose. "Don't stop to ask why! Just take me now! Come! They may be here any minute! Come!"

[151]

"Why, Rose! What does this mean?" cried Aunt Judith.

"I was on my way to call upon Mrs. Sherwood, and ask you and Polly to come up to my little cottage and spend to-morrow with me, and here you are, looking for all the world as if you were running away. I musn't run off with you like this."

"Oh, but *do*, Aunt Judith. Please do! It isn't safe to wait a minute. I'll tell you everything when we're safe at your cottage. Come!"

The fear in Rose's brown eyes was so evident, that although it seemed a strange thing to do, Aunt Judith turned about, and with Rose clinging to her arm, started in the direction of the station. A train was already made up, and about to start for Avondale. [152]

They were soon seated, and Rose drew a sigh of relief when the train started.

"Now, I'm safe," she said, leaning against Aunt Judith.

It was not until they were inside the cottage at Avondale, at twilight, the shades drawn and the lamps lighted that Rose told what had frightened her, and why she had run away.

"I don't wonder that you were frightened," Aunt Judith said. "If John had been at home you would have been brave, but gentle Mrs. Sherwood seemed to you to be no match for Great Aunt Rose. I do not think as you do. For all her gentleness Mrs. Sherwood is a fine character, and I do not think she would permit anyone to take you from her home when you had been left in her care by your Uncle John. [153]

"There is another thing to be thought of. Great Aunt Rose has left the Sherwood cottage long before this, and Mrs. Sherwood and Princess Polly I believe are greatly frightened by your absence. Don't you know that they must have been searching for you now for at least two hours, and not finding you, they will fear that you have come to harm.

"If only you had told me what it was that had so frightened you, I would have returned with you to Mrs. Sherwood, and have helped convince your aunt that you could not go home with her.

"Great Aunt Rose would not actually take you by force."

"Oh, she would!" cried Rose, "and I'm glad we're here, but we can let them know that I am safe, and that I am here with you, and why I came. I'd go back to them to-morrow if I knew Great Aunt Rose wouldn't go there again, and try to get me. [154]

"Oh, the great old Atherton house is so grand, and yet so lonely, and she doesn't love me. She was always telling me while I was there that the reason she wanted me to live there was because I was an Atherton, and she said the proper place for me to live was in the old Atherton house.

"She said there had always been a 'Rose Atherton' in the family even 'way, 'way back, and that every 'Rose Atherton' had lived in that house, and when I said I pitied them, she was angry, and she said I'd no reason to. She said the others were proud of this family, and glad to live there, and that I was the odd one. She said it was strange I'd rather live with Uncle John, and I said it *wasn't* strange because he was so loving. [155]

"Oh, I can't bear to think of the time that I lived there, and I'm glad I ran away from Polly's house before Great Aunt Rose saw me. I know she would have snatched me away from the Sherwood's.

"I was peeping in at the gate when I heard her voice.

"She was telling Mrs. Sherwood that I ought to go home and stay with her while Uncle John is away.

"I didn't wait a minute, but raced down the beach just as fast as I could. Then I thought if she came out, she might see me on the beach even at a distance, so I turned into a side street, and the next corner I turned brought me straight to you."

There was indeed consternation in the Sherwood cottage when, after the unpleasant caller had left the house, Polly commenced to look for Rose, and no Rose could be found, though thorough search was made, the servants gladly assisting, and just as Polly was crying, and declaring that she could not taste the least bit of food until Rose was found, the telephone rang. [156]

Glad news it was that Rose was safe with Aunt Judith, and Mrs. Sherwood and Polly accepted Aunt Judith's invitation to come and spend the next day at her cottage.

Aunt Judith had gone a short distance to Mrs. Grafton's house, and she had sent her message from there.

"Hurrah!" cried Harry, as Aunt Judith turned from the telephone. "I'm glad it happened that Rose had to run away, for we've missed her all these weeks that she's been spending at the shore. We'll be over to-morrow to see her, won't we, Leslie?" and he gave one of Leslie's long curls a sly twitch. [157]

"We surely will, unless you pull all my hair out when I'd want to hide my head," Leslie said, laughing.

"Oh, pshaw! The way I pull your curls amounts to just love pats," Harry cried.

"You wouldn't say so if I twitched your hair like that," Leslie responded.

"I guess I'll go down and get my hair shingled so you won't be able to get hold of it," he said. "Lend me a quarter, Leslie? I spent all I had to-day on candy and a new

bat."

Leslie refused and Harry chased her, the two laughing as they ran.

"I never saw a brother and sister who played together so prettily," Aunt Judith said. [158]

"They are great chums," Mrs. Grafton said. "Of course Harry has his boy friends, and Leslie is very fond of Lena Lindsey, but for all that my boy and girl are fast friends, and they love each other dearly."

"I like to see it," Aunt Judith said.

She hurried back to the cottage where Rose at the window was eagerly watching for her.

"Mrs. Sherwood's voice sounded very anxious when she replied to my call at the telephone, and the tone of quick relief when I told her that you were safe here at the cottage with me was very evident.

"Polly had cried until she was about sick, but of course, she will be all right now, and they will both be with us here to-morrow, for the day." [159]

"That will be fine," cried Rose, "and you'll set the larger table to-morrow, and make it look fine, but to-night, Aunt Judith, just to-night let's have the little tea table, just as we used to when I lived here with you, with the pretty pale green dishes, and the dear little sugar and cream set with the pink moss-rose buds on it. May we, Aunt Judith?"

Aunt Judith came and took the pretty face between her two hands, and looked into the eager brown eyes for a moment.

"We'll have our little tea just as we used to, because it will please you, and because I'd like nothing better," she said.

"And let me help at the table, just as I used to," Rose said, and together they worked, Rose bringing the rosebud china, while Aunt Judith brought the pale green plates, and cups and saucers from the little china closet, and placed them upon the dainty, spindle-legged table. There were tiny, fresh rolls, chocolate with cream, a dish of raspberry jam of which Rose was very fond, and even the little round pound cakes that Rose so well remembered. Aunt Judith had sent a small boy to purchase them for her while she was telephoning at Mrs. Grafton's. [160]

When all was ready, they took their places, Aunt Judith pouring the chocolate, while Rose served the cream from the dainty jug, and dropped the cubes of sugar from the quaint little silver tongs.

"Aunt Judith, I'm so happy with Uncle John, that everything I have at his home seems perfect, but there's one queer thing that I don't understand. No raspberry jam ever seems just like the jam I always had at this cottage." [161]

Aunt Judith was delighted.

"To think that you would always remember the jam, and think it a bit nicer than any other!" she said.

"Perhaps it was because we were choice of it, and served it on Sundays and holidays that made you think it extra nice."

Rose leaned toward her and laid her hand upon her arm. "And perhaps it was because you always kept the jam in that lovely cream colored crock that has the butterflies upon it. I do believe things taste nicer for being kept in pretty jars like that."

"I think so, too," Aunt Judith said, "but your Uncle John has beautiful china, so doubtless his housekeeper could find plenty of pretty dishes for serving."

"Oh, she does," Rose replied, "but in the closet, the jam is kept in a stone crock, while yours was always in the butterfly jar that I always thought so lovely." [162]

"The dearest thing about this cosy little tea is the fact——" Aunt Judith bent to kiss her cheek, "that I have you for my guest, little Rose."

CHAPTER IX

AT AVONDALE

[163]

ToC

Harry was ready to go over to the cottage at eight the next morning, but Leslie declared it a ridiculous hour to call.

"Call!" cried Harry. "Who's going to make a prim old call, I'd like to know? S'pose a fellow is going to lug a card case just to go and play with Rose?"

"Of course not," said Leslie, "but even if we are just going over to the cottage to play, we'd not care to get there when she's eating breakfast."

"Well, I guess there's no chance of doing that, Leslie. Look at the clock. It is after eight now, and we're still at table."

"I'll go over with you at nine," Leslie said, and when the clock struck nine, she found him just outside the door, his shrill whistle having told her where to find him. [164]

"Come on!" he cried. "It's nine, and if you won't come with me now I'll go over to see Rose without you."

"Well, I'll have to go back now," Leslie said, and turning, she ran across the hall, and up the stairway, laughing as she went.

"Good-bye!" shouted Harry, and off he sped, thinking it a great joke on Leslie that he should keep his word, and because she was causing the delay, run off to the cottage instead of waiting for her.

Leslie, never dreaming but that he was waiting on the walk just outside the door, wondered that he did not whistle or call to her to hurry.

She had gone back for a book that she intended to give Rose, and in her haste she could not at once find it. [165]

At last she saw a bit of its cover beneath a mass of lace and ribbon, in the corner of the drawer where she had placed it for safe keeping, and catching it up, flew down the stairway and out upon the porch.

For a moment she paused, wondering where Harry might be, when a merry shout made her look up.

Away up the avenue, just opening the cottage gate, was Harry, and even as she looked, he disappeared behind the tall shrubbery in the garden.

"Well, isn't he great?" Leslie said, as she started to run.

Rose and Harry were just behind a tall shrub that overhung the gateway, and as Leslie pushed the gate open they sprang forward in a fine attempt to startle her, but she only laughed. [166]

"You couldn't make me jump," she said, "because I saw a bit of Rose's pink dress between the branches, and Harry moved his head so that I saw his yellow hair."

"Why didn't you speak, and tell us you knew where we were hiding?" Harry asked, a nice bit vexed that Leslie had not "jumped."

"I thought you ought to have the fun of springing out at me, after you'd hidden so nicely," Leslie said.

"Better luck next time," said Rose, and together they ran around behind the cottage to learn if the little brook was as clear, and as rippling as when Rose, in the early Summer, had sailed her little boat upon it.

"The brook is here!" cried Harry. "It hasn't run away yet."

A ragged little chap now approached them, but they did not see him. They were kneeling on the bank and looking at the reflections in a little pool where no ripple stirred the surface. [167]

The comical little fellow might have kept away from them had they been facing him, but as their backs were toward him, he felt quite brave.

He was a droll looking urchin. His trousers evidently belonged to an older brother, as the legs had been rolled over and over in an effort to make them short enough so that he might walk without treading upon them. His blouse must have been the property of the same person, for the sleeves had received the same treatment as the trouser legs, that he might be able to use his hands. Upon his head rested an old straw hat. A big hole in the crown permitted a sprout of red hair to pop out, and a pair of shoes, not mates, completed his odd costume. He continued to approach until he stood within a few feet of Harry Grafton, and then he paused, as if wishing that one of the group might turn, and greet him. [168]

With chubby hands clasped behind his back he waited. He was evidently in no hurry, but after a time he became impatient.

"Hello!" he said, and Harry turned.

"Hello, little chap! Who are you?" Harry asked.

Ignoring the question, the small boy eyed Harry for a second, then he lisped:

"Where'th Gyp? Ma thaid: 'Find Gyp.'"

"Are you Gyp's little brother?" Harry asked.

The small head in the big hat nodded.

"What's your name?" inquired Harry.

"Motheth," said the child.

"*Moses!*" cried Harry. "You must be wise. Are you?"

"I do' no', but I got to find Gyp, for Ma thaid I wouldn't have no dinner unleth I found him, an' I want my dinner now."

"And yet you haven't found Gyp," Harry said. "Well, I saw him a little while ago at work on the lawn over at Captain Atherton's house. Run over there and look for him. Scoot! He may go off while you're waiting to think about it."

Wee Moses waited for no urging, but raced across Aunt Judith's lawn, out of the gate, and down the avenue, the tuft of red hair waving like a flaming feather on the crown of his hat.

"Just notice his speed," cried Harry, and Rose and Leslie laughed as the comical figure turned, and bolted up the driveway of the Atherton place. [170]

"That is only one of Gyp's small brothers," Leslie said.

"I never knew that he had one named Moses," said Rose.

"I've heard you tell their names, Harry," Leslie said, "but I never remember them all. I know there is a Mike, and a Pete, and isn't one named Hank?"

"Yes, and there's Luke and a little fellow that they call Sonny while they're trying to decide what to name him," said Harry, "and really he's such a funny looking little fellow that it would be hard work to think of a name that would fit him."

"There is a girl over on the other part of the town whose name is Tulip Rose Lillian Buttrick, and she told the girls that her parents gave her all those names because they couldn't decide which they liked best." [171]

"What an idea!" cried Rose. "Well, I'm glad I haven't Tulip and Lillian added to my name."

"I don't see why those people stopped at all," Harry said, "for there's dandelion, and phlox and marigold, and a whole lot of other flower names. Seems sort of stingy to give her only three."

"Oh, Harry! Nobody would name a girl 'Phlox,' think how it would look written," Leslie said.

"I guess they don't worry about how it would look written," Harry said.

It was when Rose and Leslie and Harry were resting after an exciting game, that Mrs. Sherwood and Princess Polly arrived. [172]

Then the fun began.

Mrs. Sherwood went in to talk with Aunt Judith, and the four playmates ran over to the Grafton's for a game of tennis. And while they were playing, eagerly hoping to win, each trying to outdo the other, little Sprite Seaford sat in the odd little living room of her home, sorting her treasures, and at the same time thinking what a fine time Princess Polly must be having at Aunt Judith's cottage with Rose and her other playmates.

The pretty shells, the coral, and the star fish, each had places of their own, but they had been taken out to show to some callers the afternoon before, and Sprite was now engaged in replacing them, each in its own especial place.

Captain Seaford was out fishing and Mrs. Seaford had gone to the village to do a few errands so Sprite was free to take her time about the task. [173]

Softly she sang as she placed the white shells in one row, and the pink shells in another.

A smart tap at the door made her start, then she called:

"Come in," and Gwen entered.

Sprite wished that she had not answered the rap.

"Goodness! What a heap of shells. What are you going to do with them? Going to keep them?" Gwen asked, in a manner that implied that she thought he lovely sea treasures simply rubbish.

"*Keep* them!" echoed Sprite. "Why of course I'm going to keep them."

"They're pretty of course," Gwen admitted, "but it must be a horrid job to keep them in order. Leave them where they are and come out on the beach." [174]

"Oh, I can't," said Sprite, and she was about to say that she must place her shells

and coral in safe positions before going out, but Gwen did not wait to hear what she had intended to say.

Instead, she hurried out, banging the door behind her.

"I'll find someone who'll do as I want to," she declared, and she ran up the beach to find Princess Polly, but Princess Polly and Rose were both at Avondale, and Gwen ran on to the center of the little coast village.

"I'll find someone to play with, I don't care who it is," she said, as she raced along.

When the sea trophies were all in their places, Sprite stepped back to view her work.

A smile curved her lips, and her eyes grew brighter.

[175]

"They look finer than they ever did before," she said softly, "and now I'll try to keep them just as they are arranged."

Sprite Seaford was often called a little "Water Witch," from the fact that she was so much at home on the water.

She could swim wonderfully well for so small a girl, and she managed her boat with skill.

After another approving glance at the rows of softly tinted shells, she ran out onto the beach, and soon in her boat she was gliding along on the shallow water near the shore, her oars moving with slow precision, keeping time to the song that she was singing, or rather to the songs that she was singing, for she was making a gay little medley of many familiar tunes.

The light breeze lifted her long, waving hair, and let it flutter back from her face, it kissed her cheeks, and made them pink like the shells that she valued most.

[176]

The great gulls hovered overhead, flapping their wings, and circling about as if trying to determine what sort of little being it was that boasted such long tresses.

Skimming over a bit of shallow water, she chanced to look down and there, on the sandy bottom, was a shell, different in shape from any in her collection.

"I must have it," she cried, and in a second she had drawn the oars into the boat, had slipped into the shallow water, and having pushed the light boat toward the shore, swam along under water until she came to the spot where the shell lay.

She came up to the surface to get the air, laughed, and swam downward again, snatched the coveted shell, and then made her way to where the little boat rocked on the waves.

[177]

She was in it in a moment, and again plying the oars, her shell on the seat opposite that on which she was sitting.

She had dressed herself in her little bathing suit, and she laughed as she saw that the warm breeze playing with her hair, was drying it, while her blouse and skirt were dripping and would continue to drip until hung up where the wind could blow through them.

Rarely a day passed that Sprite did not spend with Polly and Rose, but to-day they were away, and she must amuse herself. They were her two dearest playmates, but the dancing waves were the next best.

"I love to play with Princess Polly, and with Rose Atherton, and when I'm not playing with them, I like my boat," she said softly. "I would have asked Gwen to stay but I didn't want to her to."

[178]

"Gwen so often says unpleasant things. Polly and Rose never do, and surely the boat doesn't. It never even answers back," she added with a laugh. Then for a time she plied the oars in silence, rowing always close along the shore, out from one little bay, and into another.

Then someone hailed her.

"Hi! Sprite! Sprite Seaford!"

She turned on her seat, and there, on the beach, close to the water, was Max Deland.

"Say! Have you seen Gwen Harcourt?" he asked, his hands held trumpet-wise, to carry his voice to her.

"I saw her, oh, much as an hour ago, it may be longer," Sprite answered.

"Oh, pshaw! I mean have you seen her within a short time?" cried Max, impatiently.

[179]

"I *said* I saw her an hour ago, and maybe longer," Sprite said.

"I wonder it wasn't a week!" cried Max. "I want her now."

With that he ran off down the beach, and Sprite wondered why he was in such evident haste.

She turned the boat about, and rowed along in the direction that Max was going.

She saw him run along the beach, then stop and take something, a small book she thought, from his pocket, look steadfastly at it for a few moments, and then, after thrusting it back into his pocket, run on again.

She wondered what sort of book it was, and why Max seemed so very impatient in regard to seeing Gwen. He seemed bent upon running the entire length of the beach, and she watched him until he either entered, or ran behind the little shanty that some workmen were using as a tool house.

"I believe Max is as queer in some ways as Gwen is," mused Sprite.

"I wonder what that little book was, and why he had to stop to read it?"

A moment later she laughed, as she said: "There's one thing everyone knows, and that is that when Max and Gwen are together, they're sure to get into mischief. No one ever spends a minute wondering about that, because they *know*."

She ran the boat into shallow water, made it fast to a pile that had been placed there for the purpose, tying the rope through the iron ring on the post. Then she stepped over the side of the boat into the water, and waded ashore. She wrung the water from her skirt, took off her shoes and emptied the water from them, and then ran up the beach toward home.

She opened the door and ran in.

The Captain would be out on the fishing trip all day, and it was evident that Mrs. Seaford had not yet returned from her trip to the store.

Sprite changed her drenched bathing suit for dry clothing, and hung the skirt and blouse up to dry.

She wondered why it was that she kept thinking of Max and his little book.

CHAPTER X

THE SHIP COMES IN

It had been a warm, sunny day, the little waves had danced gaily, and the beach had been dazzling in the full glare of noonday, but the afternoon had been cooler, and at twilight the wind had changed from its warm quarter, to Northeast.

Snug and warm in the "Syren's Cave," they heard the wind rising until it became an actual gale.

The Captain had built a fire of drift wood, the squatty lamp on the table gave out a yellow glare, and around the table sat the three members of the family, the cat occupying the tiny rug in front of the fire. Puss purred contentedly, blinking when the sparks snapped and twinkled.

Sprite bent over a fascinating book of fairy tales. The pictures were charming, the stories held her captive.

Usually she enjoyed playing with puss in front of the fire, saving her book for stormy days, but she had opened the book to look at the softly tinted pictures, and the first story that held her attention was the "Tale of the Gold Children," and she became so interested in their travels in search of their fortunes and of each other, that she could not put the book aside.

Her waving hair fell about her shoulders as she read, and the light from the big lamp shimmered upon it.

Mrs. Seaford, busy with her sewing, paused at times to look at the child absorbed in her book.

Captain Seaford, in a big arm chair, reading the "Cliffmore News," looked exceedingly comfortable, but his wife knew that while he held the paper before him, he was merely glancing at the reading matter, while his mind was elsewhere.

Often he put the paper down, laying it across his knees as if he were done reading. For a few moments he would sit thus, then again he would lift the paper as if he were endeavoring to keep his mind upon it, but finding it a difficult task.

A heavy gust of wind made the windows rattle, and shook the door as if clamoring for admittance. A second later, something was hurled against the side of the house, as if the gale were using small pieces of driftwood for missiles.

The Captain arose, dropped his paper in his chair, and strode to the door.

He seemed to be trying to scan the horizon, as if looking for a sail, but no object, far or near could possibly be distinguished in the utter darkness that hung over land and sea. [185]

He turned about, closed the door, and picking up the paper, seated himself once more before the fire, but he did not read, allowing the paper to lie idly on his knees.

"What is worrying you?" his wife asked gently, laying her hand upon his arm, and looking intently at him. "Is it anything new?"

"It's the same thing, dear, that has kept me fretting for the last three weeks," he said slowly.

"When the vessel was two weeks overdue I was more anxious than I cared to admit, but now that the third week is nearly gone, I find myself unable to keep my mind upon the paper that I try to read, or for that matter upon anything else." [186]

"If any vessels intended coming in to-night, they would be obliged to get into some harbor where they would be safe until the sea is calm," said Mrs. Seaford, "and that would make them a few days later, so we'll still hope to see the one we're looking for come sailing in with flying colors."

Sprite, listening, while they thought that she was reading, now came around the table, and leaned against the Captain's sturdy shoulder.

"Pa, I wish you wouldn't worry, for some way I'm sure she's coming in all safe, I'll tell you why. Now don't you laugh. I dreamed last night that she came sailing in with flags flying, and oh, her hull and her masts were of shining gold, so let's think that means good luck. Will you, Pa?" she coaxed, winding her little arms around his neck. [187]

She could not bear to see him so worried.

"You're a comfort, little Sprite, and your Ma is another. Don't seem reasonable for a man to fret with two such blessings in his possession, but the truth is I wanted the luck that I believed the vessel would bring, for you two dear ones, far more than I wanted it for myself."

"Then don't say you *wanted* it, for that does not sound hopeful," Mrs. Seaford said.

"No, say you *want* it for us, for that sounds as if it were coming," Sprite said, "and I'm sure it will come, only it's delayed."

He summoned up a smile for the child who was endeavoring to cheer him.

"I surely can truthfully say, 'I want it for you'," he said. [188]

"I have ventured all that I had on that ship's cargo, because I believed it was sure to bring back a little fortune that would enable me to give greater comfort to your mother, Sprite, and you."

"Well, it's coming! It's coming! I know it is. I saw the golden ship last night in my dreams, and I sprang up and looked from the window, and the moonlight was making a bright, glittering path on the waves, just where, in my dream, the ship had been."

She had left the Captain's side to skip and dance about in her excitement, but now she came softly back to lean against him, as he sat in his big chair.

She laid her cheek against his a second, then looking into his kindly eyes, she said:

"It is stormy to-night, and it may storm to-morrow, but when it clears, I know, oh, I just *know* the ship will come in." [189]

It was later than Sprite usually sat up, and the Captain pointed to the clock.

"It's late even for a cheerful little prophet to be up," he said, and Sprite danced away to her tiny chamber, happy in the thought that she had really cheered them. The next day the storm continued, but at night the gale diminished, and on the following day the sun rose bright, and golden, giving promise of a fine day.

Sprite ran out onto the beach.

She looked far out across the dancing waves, to the horizon, where plainly she could see the sails of incoming vessels.

Was either one of these distant vessels the one for which the Captain was so eagerly looking?

"They all look alike 'way off there!" she murmured, but a moment later she whispered in disgust: [190]

"What a goosie I am! Those vessels have only one sail! They're neither of them ships. Who'd think I was a Captain's daughter?"

Still she stood scanning the line where the sky and ocean met. At any moment a big ship might come in sight, and she thought how quickly she would run to tell the news. Then she hesitated.

No, she would not hasten to tell it, for it might indeed be a ship, and yet not the one for which the Captain had long been looking, or it might be one that was not

bound for Cliffmore, but instead would go farther out to sea.

There was one sail on which the bright sunlight lingered, making it whiter than those of the other vessels, so that it was easier for her to watch that one than either of the others.

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"Why! It has turned about!" she cried, "and now, oh now, I see other masts and other sails! It's a ship! It's a ship! Oh, is it the one that Pa longs to see?"

She would gladly have stood watching until that vessel sailed into Cliffmore, but a long, silvery note from the horn called her in to breakfast.

Her eyes were bright, and her cheeks pink with excitement, and the Captain looking across the table, sighed as he thought of all that he had planned to do with the money that he had so confidently expected. He had built rosy air castles, had dreamed of comforts, and pleasures for the two dear ones who now sat opposite him at the table, the one full of hope, and cheer, the other trying to summon cheer that she did not feel, in order to comfort him. The forenoon passed swiftly, because the three were busy.

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Captain Seaford was making some repairs that the gale had made necessary. Indoors Mrs. Seaford had needed the help of little Sprite in some work that she was doing, and when the noon hour came they could hardly believe the clock.

Sprite, usually eager to be out of doors, kept close at her mother's side, pulling bastings from the garments that she was making.

Sometimes she paused to look from the window, then again she would busy herself with the bastings, and after a time, Mrs. Seaford, looking up, noticed with what rapt attention Sprite was gazing out at the ocean.

"What is it, Sprite?" she asked. "Are you thinking of the dream vessel that you told us about last evening?"

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"I can't help thinking of it," Sprite answered, "and truly I do believe the dream meant good luck." "I'd not wish you to believe very strongly in dreams," Mrs. Seaford said, "but I'll confess that ever since you told us that dream, I've been thinking of it, and, in some way, it has given me hope."

The afternoon was spent much as the forenoon had been, save that the bastings were all out of the new garments, and while Mrs. Seaford still plied her needle, Sprite picked up the book of fairy tales, and tried to read.

There was one story that attracted her attention because its illustration showed a great ship, of ancient design. The name of the story was "The Gift Ship," and Sprite began to read. Riches formed its cargo, jewels studded its masts, and its figure head, representing a mermaid, was of solid gold.

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"Oh, that is grander than our ship was to be," thought Sprite, and she allowed the book to lie idly in her lap, while she looked out at the floating clouds, and wondered where the white-sailed ship had gone that, at early morning, had floated along that distant point where sky and water met.

The captain looked in at the open door, and for a moment seemed to be studying the two who sat near the window. Then he spoke.

"I'm going down to the wharf to see Jack Windom. He wants my opinion of a fishing smack he's thinking of buying. I'll not be gone long."

He started off at a quick pace, but a few minutes later, Sprite saw, from her window, that the captain had met his friend when but halfway to the wharf.

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"Oh, Ma, Jack has come up halfway to meet Pa. I guess he was coming up to see if Pa had forgotten about going down to look at the new fishing smack.

"Why, Ma, they're shaking hands. They never do that. Why, they are both coming back!"

Mrs. Seaford knew that something more than usual had happened. She hurried to the door, just as the two men reached it, and then, the captain grasped both her hands, crying out in his excitement:

"It has come in, dear! It has come in! The vessel that I've been looking for, longing for, worrying for is in safe and sound, and the cargo, if my friend Jack isn't wild, is even more valuable than I had dreamed!

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"Sprite! Sprite! Little girl, your dream has come true!"

What a day of rejoicing it was!

"The dream came true! The dream came true! The golden ship has come in!" cried Sprite, dancing about like a little wild thing, while Mrs. Seaford laid her slender hands on the captain's shoulders, her eyes filled with happy tears as she quietly said:

"For your sake, dear, I am so glad."

Jack Windom, hardy sailor, and bluff, kindly friend, was more moved than he cared to admit. He drew the back of his hand across his eyes, remarking that the sun was

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"tur'ble glarin'," but his friends knew that he was fully in sympathy with them, and that his honest eyes had filled with tears, as happy as their own, because of the good luck that had come to them.

"I'm glad for ye, all three of ye, and I wish I could hev lent a hand ter hurried her in, but she's here now, and I'm as glad as you be that she's in safe an' sound. It's a great day fer ye, Cap'n, an' I'm glad, I declare I am."

Captain Seaford again started for the wharf, this time to see not only the new fishing smack, but the vessel that had brought such great cheer to the little home, and with his arm locked in Jack Windom's he hurried down the beach.

Mrs. Seaford and Sprite sat down to talk of their good fortune, and after a time little Sprite said:

"I know I'm not to believe in signs or dreams, but truly I *did* see the new moon over my right shoulder, and I *did* dream of a golden ship." [198]

"So you did, dear," Mrs. Seaford said, "and you cheered me wonderfully last evening just by your telling of your lovely dream."

"That's why I told it," Sprite said.

"I thought while I was telling that, you'd not hear the gale, and by to-day the storm would have cleared away, and maybe the ship would come in, and it did."

For a few moments the two sat thinking, then Sprite spoke again of the thoughts that filled her mind.

"Yesterday I tried to read a story in my fairy book, called 'The Gift Ship,' but the ship's masts were studded with jewels, and its figurehead was of pure gold, and some way it seemed too grand, too fine, while Pa was longing for just a plain ship like the other ships that we see every day. I knew it was its cargo that he was anxious about, but the story seemed too good to be true, and I didn't care to read it." [199]

"Now, oh, now I can read it, and enjoy it, too, for no matter how grand the story ship is, Pa has seen the one that he has been looking for, and now we are happy."

"Indeed we are," Mrs. Seaford said; "we are thankful, too, Sprite. Think how different would be our thoughts to-night if Jack Windom's news had been that the vessel that your father had been looking for had foundered!"

"We are thankful indeed, we are grateful, Sprite. Oh, we are blessed with the best news that could have been brought to us," said Mrs. Seaford.

"I wish we could celebrate in some way when Pa comes back," Sprite said.

"We shall have to be thinking of supper now. Suppose we go out together to set the table, and you shall help me to make it attractive." [200]

"Come! We'll use our prettiest dishes, and we'll set the rose-pink geranium in the center, and then we'll see what we can do toward providing a treat."

CHAPTER XI

LITTLE PITCHERS

The day spent at Aunt Judith's cottage had been delightful, and Harry and Leslie had been such fine playmates that Rose and Polly wished that they, too, were staying at Cliffmore.

A few days had passed since the visit, and Princess Polly, still thinking of the day at Avondale, sat stringing shells on a long rose-colored cord.

She was sitting on a low seat in the garden, her box of shells beside her. The shells were for Leslie, and Polly was selecting them with much care, that they might be of nearly the same size.

The garden was charming with its fine wall, and the lovely flowers that blossomed within its enclosure. [202]

The house set well up on the beach, and its broad lawn and flower beds were surely safe from any encroachment by the sea, yet as a precaution, the massive wall had been built, and if by any chance a storm should drive the waves a bit too far, they would break against the wall, and then recede, leaving the garden unharmed.

The string of shells was now nearly a half yard in length, and Polly held it up for the admiration of Rose and Sprite, who had just arrived, and were running along the path.

"Oh, isn't it lovely?" said Rose, "and the colors, how nice they look, first bluish white and then cream white."

"Leslie will like that," said Sprite.

"Anyone would, they're strung so prettily."

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"I've ten more shells to add to the string and then it will be all ready for Leslie. Everybody keep still until I have the ten shells in place," said Princess Polly, "and then I'll talk with you."

Rose and Sprite pretended to be making a great effort to keep still, but the task was evidently too much for them, and after a few seconds of silence, Rose laughed, Sprite echoed, and then Polly laughed because they did.

"Oh, you two can't keep from talking," she said, "and neither can I, that is, not for very long, but I did keep still until I put the tenth shell on the string, and I'll put it in this little box. There, now I'll listen, for I know you've something to tell."

The three little friends were now sitting on the long garden seat, the tall shrubs behind them making a cool shade.

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Mr. Sherwood had had the space inside the fine wall filled with rich loam, so that inside the garden gate was a genuine country garden, while outside the wall lay the sandy beach, and the surf, and spray.

The flowers in the garden seemed to like the breezes from the sea, for their colors were glowing, and their perfume sweet.

"There's such queer news this morning," Sprite said. "First, a sailor that Pa knows came up from the wharf, and he said a vessel got 'way out to sea, when they found a boy had hidden himself on board, a regular stowaway, and the first fishing smack they met, that was heading for Cliffmore, took him aboard and brought him back, and who do you think that was?"

"Why, how could we ever guess?" Polly asked in surprise.

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"Well, that was John Selby, the grocer's boy. You know the store over at the Center," said Sprite, "and I guess you've seen the boy. He's 'bout fourteen, and has red hair, and he's the one that helps deliver goods from his father's store."

Yes, they remembered him.

Good-tempered, happy-go-lucky John Selby. What could have tempted him to leave home, and become a stowaway? Sprite knew why he had done it.

"He said he didn't want to be a grocer when he grew up," she said. "He said he loved the sea, and would rather be a sailor, so now his father says if he'll stay at home and help in the store until he's a bit older, he'll consent to his becoming a sailor, if he still thinks he'd like a sailor's life."

The pronouns were a bit confused, but Rose and Polly understood.

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They hardly knew whether to be sorry for John or his father.

"It seems hard for John to want to go and leave his father," Polly said, "and it's hard that John can't be a sailor boy if he wants to."

"And you can't know which is the harder," said Sprite.

"Well, I wouldn't think any boy would run away from home when he knew that his father and mother would grieve for him," Rose said.

"I'd think any boy would if he wanted to!" said a sharp voice.

It was Max Deland who had entered the garden, and now, with a defiant air, stood staring at the group of playmates, as if daring them to disagree with him.

His cap was tilted at a saucy angle, his hands were thrust into his pockets, and his feet, wide apart, were firmly braced.

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He looked as if ready to quarrel with anyone who chanced to differ with him.

"Do you mean to say, Max, that you'd do such a thing?" Sprite asked.

"I don't say I would, and I don't say I wouldn't," Max said in a sullen voice.

"Well, *would* you?" Princess Polly asked, but Max looked disagreeable, and in a few moments had turned and left them, as abruptly as he had come.

For a moment Polly, Rose and Sprite sat very still, each looking into the faces of the others.

"What made him so cross?" Sprite asked, "and if he *did* feel cross, and couldn't help it, then I should have thought he would have stayed away."

"So should I," said Polly and Rose, and "so should I," echoed Sprite.

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Outside the garden wall eager ears were listening, and the ears belonged to a little

figure that crouched close by the gateway, just out of sight of the three playmates, yet quite near enough to hear all that had been said.

It was Gwen Harcourt.

She had been a bit too saucy to Max Deland, had called him a "sissy," and what boy would bear that? Max had returned the favor by calling her a "Tom-boy," and then he had made a horrid face, and raced off up the beach.

Then Gwen was sorry. She liked to play with Max, and while he could run away, and laugh as he went, Gwen was ready to cry.

He was quite as fond of Gwen as she was of him, but he was a great tease, and beside that, he liked to hear her calling to him to return. [209]

It flattered his vanity.

"Come back, Max! Come *back!*" she had shouted.

"Max dear, I take it back. You're not a sissy. Max! Oh, Max, I'm sorry!"

Max heard, but he chose to keep right on, and at last he reached the Sherwood house, and pausing for breath near the gate, had overheard the three friends talking about the boy who had run away from his home at Cliffmore.

A few moments later he had chosen to enter, especially because he was feeling rather cross with Gwen, and as Gwen was not at hand to quarrel with, he entered the garden to sneer at what his playmates were saying.

Gwen had followed him, and the time that he had spent in the garden had given her the chance to catch up. Six little stone steps led down from the garden to the beach, and Max ran down, pushed the gate wide, and sprang out onto the hard white sand. [210]

Gwen crouched at his left, but he shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked to the right down the beach. She was pert and willful with all the others, but with Max she was humble indeed.

"Max, here I am, and I'm sorry I teased you. Do be nice to me now, won't you? I won't ever call you 'sissy' again."

"Guess you won't!" Max said, in anything but a pleasant tone. "I wouldn't let you say it if I was here, but I've 'bout decided to run away to sea!"

"Oh, Max, Max! I don't want you to, and just think! What would your mother say?" [211]

Gwen meant it rightly, but it did not please Max.

"There you go!" he cried. "That's the same as saying 'sissy' again. I guess I can go where I want to. A man can do as he likes without asking."

Again Gwen blundered.

"Oh, but Max, you're not a man. You're just a boy, and I wish you wouldn't talk as if you meant to go 'way off somewhere."

Just a boy! That was aggravating. Max felt sure that in a moment more she would call him a *little* boy, and that would indeed be too much for any boy to ever overlook.

Gwen laid her hand on his arm, intending to coax him to stay, but Max was too angry to be easily pacified.

"See here!" he cried, roughly brushing her hand from his arm. "You heard me say I'd 'bout decided to run away to sea, but you don't *know* whether I will or not, so look out and not be a tell-tale, for if I do go, and ever come back, and find out you told, I'd never speak to you!" [212]

Before Gwen could get over her surprise, and grasp the meaning of what he had said, he was off at top speed down the beach.

She started to follow, but he turned and shouted: "Don't you dare to tag on!"

Poor Gwen! Max was the only playmate with whom she had ever been gentle. She had treated him far better than she had ever treated the girls at Avondale, or the new acquaintances at Cliffmore, and now he was going to run away, and she was not to ever mention it!

She reached home very tired, and also very unhappy. [213]

At lunch she refused to eat, but that was not unusual. She often did that to attract the attention of the other boarders.

As usual Mrs. Harcourt commenced to fuss, and to question her.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

"Is there nothing that looks tempting?"

Then glancing at those who sat opposite, she said: "Gwen's appetite is so very dainty and capricious, she rarely cares for what is served here."

The guests were a bit tired of that speech, as they had heard it at every meal during the Summer.

"You're too tired to eat, darling," Mrs. Harcourt said. "Did you play too hard with Max this morning?"

At the mention of Max, Gwen burst into tears, and ran from the table, dropping her napkin on the floor, and walking upon it in her flight. [214]

Mrs. Harcourt was really alarmed. She wondered what Max had done to so upset Gwen. Perhaps he had struck her. He had a terrible disposition, while Gwen had the temperament of an angel. So thought Mrs. Harcourt as she left the dining room, her own lunch untasted, to follow Gwen, and coax from her the reason for her distress.

The cause of any disturbance that led Gwen to shed tears was attributed to the outrageous temper of the other child, or children, as the case happened to be, and Mrs. Harcourt never dreamed that sometimes Gwen showed a temper that was rather far from angelic.

Max was not at lunch, but that caused no surprise, because he often was absent at one o'clock, returning at six for dinner with an appetite that seemed more befitting a brawny tramp than a boy who was always well fed. [215]

On this day, however, he did not appear at dinner, and when seven, and eight, chimed forth from the hall clock, and still no Max in sight, Mrs. Deland was frightened.

"Do keep up your courage, Mrs. Deland," said a man who happened to stand near her.

"Your small boy will come prancing in before long, just as he always does. He usually remains out until you are nearly wild, and then he comes crawling in by the back door, and wonders why the chef isn't on hand to cook a separate dinner for him."

It was the truth, but Mrs. Deland thought the speaker exceedingly hard-hearted. She had telephoned to everyone whom she thought might have seen Max, but all replied that he had not been noticed, and that proved that he had not been near them, for the boy was so saucy, so noisy, and so desperately active, that he must have been noticed if he was anywhere within sight. [216]

"Nine!" chimed the clock, and a few of the guests of the house organized a searching party, and started out to hunt for Max.

They felt little interest in the matter, from the fact that the same thing had happened so many times that they seemed always to be searching for Max.

The boy had made himself a nuisance in countless ways, and while neither member wished any harm to come to Max, they felt that it would be a great relief if he and his mother would leave Cliffmore, and never think of returning. [217]

Once outside the house, however, they made thorough work of their search, but although they looked in every place that a small boy might get into, and in many that seemed impossible, they did not find him.

One man, tired and disgusted, grumbled as he tramped along, and several others who did not utter the thoughts that filled their minds, felt every bit as disgusted as he did.

"It's nonsense, clear nonsense, tramping all over the place, hunting for a little run-away rascal, who, at this moment, is doubtless eating a comfortable meal, after having returned when he felt like it."

When they reached the house, they were surprised to find that Max was not there. [218]

It was the first time that a party searching for the boy had returned to learn that he was still missing.

Mrs. Deland had become quite used to having Max away sometimes all day, and often until after eight in the evening, and, as a rule, she was reasonably calm, but that nine o'clock should have passed without hearing from him seemed beyond belief.

With the return of the searching party her courage gave way, and she sank onto a low seat, her cheeks white, and her hands tightly clenched.

The women gathered about her, trying to comfort her, but she seemed not to hear what they said.

How still she sat, her hands still tightly clasped, her eyes looking from one face to another.

Then her eyes closed. She had fainted, and gently they carried her to her room, one woman promising to remain with her, after the doctor should have gone. [219]

Gwen had acted so strangely that Mrs. Harcourt had ordered a light lunch sent up to their room, saying that Gwen was too ill to go down to dinner, and that she would remain with her. No sound of the excitement reached them. It was in vain that she questioned Gwen. Gwen only replied that she and Max had quarreled, and that he had been "just perfectly horrid."

When morning came, Gwen awoke feeling a bit better.

Having remained in their room all the afternoon and evening, they had heard nothing of the search for Max, nor did they know that he had not, as usual, returned.

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CHAPTER XII

ToC

MAX A STOWAWAY

Soon after breakfast, Gwen, looking for someone to play with, ran across the broad piazza to where, pale and weary, Mrs. Deland sat.

"I want Max," cried Gwen, in her usual pert manner.

"Where is he? When is he coming out?"

Mrs. Deland uttered a low cry.

"He's lost, little Gwen! Haven't you heard? They are searching everywhere for him, and they force me, his mother, to remain here, and wait with what patience I may."

With a sudden impulse she threw her arms about Gwen, and held her close, then more gently lifted her face so that their eyes met.

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"You loved my little Max," she said. "Are you sorry that he is not yet found? Stop a moment; you played with him yesterday. When did you last see him? When were you two children last together?"

"Oh, you're hurting me, holding me so tight. Let go, and I'll tell where I saw him," cried Gwen.

"Why, child, I didn't dream I was really hurting you. Now tell me."

"I saw him 'way over to Princess Polly's house," Gwen said slowly, "and we,—we, oh, we quarreled some, and Max didn't stay with me."

"Well, where did he go when he left you?" Mrs. Deland asked eagerly.

A crowd had gathered about the two, and stood listening.

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"He told me not to tell," said Gwen, shutting her lips firmly together.

"What? You know where he is, and will not tell me, his own mother? Why, child, I am sick with worrying. Tell me, this moment!"

Gwen made no reply.

She loved Max, but she had never liked his mother, and that she should command her to tell made the little girl more stubborn than she had ever been before.

"I wouldn't tell now even if Mrs. Deland and all those other women stuck pins into me," thought Gwen.

It was in vain that they questioned her. Pleading, threatening, coaxing were equally unavailing, and when Mrs. Harcourt, seeing the group, came out upon the piazza, Gwen flew to her, saying that everyone was teasing her.

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"It is an outrage!" cried Mrs. Harcourt, her voice shrill with anger.

"I wonder what you can be thinking of? A half dozen grown people tormenting one small girl."

"My dear Mrs. Harcourt, you don't at all understand," said a tall, haughty-looking woman. "Your little daughter knows where the lost boy, Max Deland, is, and, although his mother is nearly wild with anxiety, she will not tell, that we may know where to find him."

Mrs. Harcourt hesitated. Then she looked at Gwen's flushed cheeks and downcast eyes.

"Do you know where Max is?" she asked.

"No, I *don't!*" snapped Gwen.

Mrs. Harcourt turned and faced them. She extended her hands.

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"There!" she cried. "You see, do you not, that it was idle to tease Gwen? She does not know where he is."

"She certainly said that she knew where he went," said a stout lady. "I do know

where he *went!*" shouted Gwen, "but how do I know where he is *now?*"

"Where did he go?" questioned Mrs. Harcourt.

"I promised him I wouldn't tell," said Gwen, "and I won't!"

She wriggled from her mother's grasp, and racing across the piazza, fled up the stairway to her room.

"Gwen is too honorable to break a promise," sighed Mrs. Harcourt, as she left the group of disgusted ladies, to follow her small girl to her apartment.

"Too stubborn would be nearer the truth," muttered the stout lady. [225]

"That child should be made to tell," said another.

"She shall be made to tell," Mrs. Deland said as she turned toward the small room that served as an office.

Gwen, as stubborn as a little mule, refused to tell the proprietor of the house, when he called her into his office, and after talking for a half hour on the naughtiness of being stubborn, and the especial naughtiness of not telling where Max went, and thus helping the searchers to find him, she again flatly refused.

If it had been true honor in being determined to keep her promise that made Gwen refuse, one could not but praise her courage, but her impulse was wholly selfish.

Max had said that if he ever returned and found that she had told, he would never speak to her again. [226]

She valued Max's friendship above that of any of her playmates, and she refused to tell where he went, because he had insisted.

There was great rejoicing at "The Syren's Cave."

The "coming in" of the ship that Captain Seaford had long been looking for proved to be even more fortunate than he had dreamed.

Its cargo was indeed valuable, and as he obtained a much higher price for it than he had expected, his kindly heart was filled with gratefulness, and his eyes grew brighter, and he walked with a lighter step.

Mrs. Seaford went about the little house, singing at her work, and Sprite, happy, laughing Sprite, danced upon the beach, played in the surf, or rocked in her boat, singing, always singing of the water sprites, the mermen and mermaids of whom she never tired of hearing. [227]

Princess Polly and Rose were both delighted when they heard of the Seafords' good fortune, but of the disappearance of Max they had not heard, because they had been away on a little ocean trip.

It happened, on the day that Max decided to run away, that no steamer lay at the wharf, nor was there so much as a ship in sight.

There was, however, a coal barge, and Max, determined to go on that very day, watched his chance, and at the first opportunity slipped aboard, where in frantic haste he looked for a hiding place.

Steps approaching set him into panic, and an empty barrel standing in a shadowy corner of the little cabin seemed his only refuge. [228]

"There's only a few er these ol' pertaters, so I'll chuck 'em inter this barrel in the cabin," shouted a gruff voice, and in they went onto Max's head and shoulders. Not a sound did he make, although the potatoes felt decidedly hard, and evidently had been thrown in with none too gentle a hand.

It seemed to the boy in his cramped position as if the coal barge would never start.

At twilight, however, he felt the motion, and knew that he was sailing away from Cliffmore, the empty barge to return with another load of coal, but he, Max Deland, to keep straight on in search of a land where a fellow didn't have to mind his mother, but could seek and easily find a fortune, and then return sufficiently independent to have his own way. [229]

It happened that Max had been seen sneaking aboard the vessel, and a bit later jumping into the empty barrel to hide, and the sailors had first thought of putting him ashore with a sharp warning to keep away from the barge in the future.

Then it occurred to them that a better lesson could be given him by letting him remain on board for a few days, and then placing him aboard of the first fishing smack that they met, bound for Cliffmore.

The potatoes had not been carelessly thrown in upon him. It had been done intentionally, to act as a part of his punishment.

Long before anyone on board was asleep, Max was wishing that he had never thought of running away.

He thought of the fine dinner that had been served at Cliffmore hours before, and here was he, Max Deland, in an old and dirty barrel that vegetables had been stored in, very hungry, and with no way of obtaining anything to eat.

After a time, his cramped position became unbearable, and slowly but surely he crept out of the barrel, and upon the cabin floor, where, because he was so weary, he fell into sound sleep.

At daylight a group of sailors were looking down at the sleeping boy.

The captain of the barge spoke.

"Good-looking little chap, but he must learn not to try this trick again. Let him lie there until he wakes. Then give him some breakfast, hard tack and water, remember, and then give him the task I set for him. When the first fishing smack, bound for Eastville appears, start him for home."

"Aye, aye, sir!" was the prompt reply, and the boy stirred as if he had heard it.

"Come now! Step lively!" cried the mate. "No loitering on shipboard."

Max, hardly awake, barely grasped the meaning of the words, and scrambled to his feet.

"Now, then, forward march if you want something to eat."

Max marched. He dared not refuse, but he did rebel when he saw what was offered for his breakfast.

"I can't eat that!" he said angrily.

"All right! Forward, march! We'll let ye work on an empty stomach if ye really hanker to."

All sorts of tasks were set for him, and for the next few days he was kept exceedingly busy.

He learned to do as he was told, and to do it promptly; to eat what was given him without grumbling, and there was something else that he learned by his hard experience. He learned what a fortunate boy he had always been; to appreciate all the good things that had always been so freely given him, and above all these, he longed for his mother's love.

He thought what a good boy he'd be if ever he reached the shore, and he resolved never to run away, whatever happened that displeased him.

A happy boy was Max when a passing smack stopped long enough so that he could be taken on board, and then headed straight for Cliffmore.

Max thought nothing had ever looked so beautiful as the cliffs from which Cliffmore took its name, when in the early morning they sailed into the bay, and saw the warm sunlight kissing land and sea.

Ah, he would never run away again, for now he knew the value of home and love.

He ran all the way from the wharf, and up the beach and climbed the great ledge on which sat the house where with his mother he had been staying. He rushed up the steps to the piazza, wildly crying:

"Where are you? Where is everybody? I've come home! I've come home!"

They came at once, and from every direction, like ants from an ant hill, and swarmed around him, asking more questions than he could answer.

A tall, handsome woman rushed across the piazza, her eyes bright with hope.

"Stand aside!" she cried. "It is Max! My little Max! I know his voice! Oh, let me reach him!"

The crowd parted, and the boy was instantly clasped in his mother's arms.

"My own! My darling!" she sobbed.

"I won't ever run away again!" he responded, his arms about her neck.

"Come!" said one of the crowd that had gathered. "Let them be alone together for a while," and as with one accord the group melted, the guests going far from the two who, for the time being, needed no other company than each other.

Of course, a bit later Max told his story to eager listeners, and when he had finished the little tale, he said: "And you folks ought to know that Gwen was a regular brick, to keep the secret I told her not to let out. Any girl but Gwen would have told it first thing, but Gwen is a brick. Don't all of you think so?"

A gentleman on the outskirts of the little crowd proposed cheers.

"Three cheers for Max and his brick!" he shouted, and they gave them with a will.

On the same morning that the little fishing smack brought Max home to Cliffmore, the beautiful steam yacht, *Dolphin*, sailed into the bay, with its owner, Captain John

Atherton, and his beautiful bride standing together on the deck, and returning the salutes of the host of friends who awaited them on the wharf.

Handkerchiefs were waved by the ladies, hats were swung by the men, and foremost in the waiting crowd stood little Rose Atherton, a basket of roses to offer them, and the housekeeper close beside her, lest in her excitement she might actually be swept off the pier. [236]

"Oh, I'm so glad, so glad!" cried Rose. "Dear Uncle John, and dear——" she paused. What should she call this lovely young woman?

Iris laughed.

"You must learn to call me 'Aunt Iris,'" she said, stooping to kiss the little blushing face.

"I'll love to," Rose said, "and I won't have to learn, same's I won't have to learn to love you, for I love you now, you are so sweet, so lovely."

"Oh, John, was there ever a sweeter welcome? I am so happy."

At the reception a week later, Rose stood beside the dear, new aunt, and felt very proud and happy "helping to receive."

Princess Polly and Sprite were delighted that Rose was now to be so happy. [237]

"Of course it is dearest to have one's own mamma," Polly said, "but Rose had neither papa nor mamma, so lovely Mrs. Iris is next best, and I do truly think she is dear."

"So do I," agreed Sprite, "and of course if Rose was happy with her Uncle John she'll be just so much happier with her new aunt, but who told you to call her 'Mrs. Iris'?"

"No one," said Polly, "but for that minute I couldn't think of Atherton, and I couldn't call her Mrs. Captain John. Of course she is Mrs. Atherton now."

"Oh, yes," agreed Sprite, "and my mamma says she's almost an angel. She did truly say that this morning, and Pa said:

"That's just what she is, and Captain John Atherton is a lucky man and I'm glad for him." [238]

Already, plans were being made for the return to Avondale, and Rose, Princess Polly and Sprite were looking forward to the opening of school when, with Harry and Leslie, Lena and Rob, Vivian, and all the other playmates, they would be having the pleasant school days, and the good times that were always enjoyed at Avondale.

Gyp was to be "indoor man" on Captain Atherton's place, and study in evening classes, taking a business course that would fit him for a better position that the captain assured him should surely be his, if he excelled in his class work.

Sprite was indeed to be happy. The year before she had spent at the Avondale school, making her home with Princess Polly and Rose. She had been happy with them, but of course, at times, she was somewhat homesick. [239]

This year would be so different. Captain Seaford's good fortune enabled him to rent a small apartment for the Winter at Avondale, and there Sprite could enjoy her school, and merry playmates, and yet be with her parents.

Gwen Harcourt was telling all whom she met at Cliffmore that she was very tired of living at Avondale, and that she did not think she should live there much longer. She said that if she fussed enough about it, her mamma would take her somewhere else. All who knew Gwen felt reasonably sure that she would "fuss."

Rose knew that her home at Avondale would now be perfect. Uncle John would love her as he always had loved her, and of her new aunt she was already very fond. [240]

Surely it promised to be a bright and happy Winter for Princess Polly and her friends, the merry playmates at Avondale, where good times and gay spirits prevailed and kind and happy hearts worked with equal zeal at study and at merry-making.

THE END



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Typographical errors corrected in text:

Page 156: 'left he house' replaced with 'left the house'
Page 214: 'left he dining room' replaced with 'left the
dining room'

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