

THE TAMBOURINE GIRL.

L. Y. Meade,

CHAPTER I.

THE children were very busy, for Humphrey was coming home. This was a most important fact, and it was necessary to distinguish it in several remarkable ways. For instance, a whole holiday was required by Nan and Hester, and Teddy and the baby were to have new dresses for the occasion. Nan and Hester were the people who were to make all the necessary preparations for Humphrey. Of course such trivial matters as getting his little room ready, and his small white bed well aired, and the drawers of the tiny wardrobe in his bedroom made neat and tidy in preparation for his school clothes—all these things were left to nurse; but the real important preparations, such as sticking paper flags over the chimney-piece, and printing the word "*Welcome!*" in rather crooked characters on a large piece of paste-board, and putting flowers here and there, and upsetting all the ordinary arrangements of the nursery, these were left in Nan's and Hester's hands. Humphrey was coming home from school to enjoy his first summer vacation, and the little sisters felt that no trouble was too great to expend upon him.

Nan and Hester were twins, and Nan was five minutes older than Hester, but no one to look at her would have seen the slightest trace of seniority either in her face or her manner, for Hester had a most tiresome habit of forgetting these five minutes difference between them, and of taking the lead on all occasions. Though the little sisters were twins they were not alike either in character or appearance, for Nan had a gentle face, with a fair complexion and blue eyes, and Hester was a little gypsy, dark-eyed, with a brown complexion and curling black hair, and the most daring, mischievous little spirit in the world.

Hester had a more vivid imagination than Nan,

and she busied her little brain, as well as her active hands, on her brother's account. Hester quite made up her mind that Humphrey was a hero, that he was a conquering hero, who at school had carried all before him. The best and most valuable prizes had fallen to Humphrey's share, his conduct had been more than admirable, and he had gone through an attack of measles from which he had suffered in a style which had forced the wondering praises of the whole school. Hester fully made up her mind that all these delightful laurels lay at Humphrey's feet, and she felt very angry at any one doubting her glowing statements.

"Nurse," she said, on the morning of the day that Humphrey was coming back, "Nan and I have just been to mother, and we are to have a whole holiday, and do just what we like; and we are going to be very busy all day long, Nan and me, preparing for the conquering hero."

"Who's that?" said nurse, who was rather sharp and quick in her temper, and who was by no means elated at the prospect of a whole holiday for the two little girls, for Miss Mason, the governess kept them quiet and off her hands for a few hours each morning at least. "Who's the conquering hero?" repeated nurse. "Do stand out of my way, Miss Nan; I can't see to comb out Master Teddy's curls with you standing direct in the light."

"Why, you tiresome old nurse," exclaimed Hester, "the conquering hero is Humphrey—our own darling dear Humphrey, who took the measles and got well again, and got the first prize for not being a dunce, or perhaps it was for being a dunce, I forget. Anyhow he's coming home to-night, and these are his first holidays, and we're as glad as possible—aren't we, Nan?"

"Yes," replied Nan, "we are very glad indeed—we are quite delighted."

"And we are going to have a whole holiday," pursued Hester, "and won't we make preparations just! *You* need not bother, nursie, for we'll do all the nice, jolly messy part; we'll cut the coloured papers, and we'll pin up the flags, and we'll work with the paste pot, and we'll pick the flowers, and all you'll have to do is to tidy up after us presently. Come away, Nancy, come away. Nursie, do give me a kiss. I'm as happy as possible; I'm bursting with happiness."

Catching her little sister's hand Hester danced and skipped out of the night nursery, and poor nurse, with a sigh, proceeded with the younger children's toilets.

"My missis has made a sad mistake," she said to herself, "in letting that little imp, Miss Hetty, have full liberty. Why, the mischief that child is up to is past telling, and there am I with my hands full, and Master Teddy showing signs of cold, and the baby cutting his blessed eye teeth! Oh dear, oh dear! I only hope the missis will take the young ladies out in the afternoon, and I must do the best I can this morning."

Mrs. St. Clair certainly had no intention of burdening poor nurse with so wild and mischievous a little girl as Hester, but it happened that immediately after breakfast she was called out suddenly, and as the business which obliged her to go away was very urgent, she had only time to say imploringly to her eager little girls—

"You will try to be very good, my darlings, and not to give nurse any special trouble, for she is rather worried with Teddy this morning."

"We'll keep out of nurse's way, and we'll be as good as gold, mother dear," responded Hester. "Won't we be as good as gold, Nan?"

"Oh yes, quite," said Nan. And then they both kissed their mother, and were as determined to keep their word as any little maidens in the whole of England.

There is an old saying however, that promises are like pie-crust, made to be broken, and this old proverb was very soon exemplified in the cases of Nan and Hester. They meant to be very good, but somehow they contrived from an early hour that day to rub the people they came in contact with the wrong way. It is very disagreeable to be rubbed the wrong way—the process usually sets nerves quivering and tempers flying, and it is sometimes known to result in tears, and in very angry

words. Nan and Hetty made such a mess of the day nursery in their attempt to decorate it with paper flags, and little bunches of flowers and cards pinned crookedly on the wall with "*Welcome!*" and "*Hurrah for the Conquering Hero!*" and such-like demonstrations of affection for their returning brother, that nurse and Sally, the under nurse, both became cross, and declared they would spend no more of their time in sweeping and dusting, and putting in order. And then the baby was discovered with a pin in its mouth, for Hester had left a whole boxful on the floor within its reach, and Teddy began to help himself to the contents of the paste pot, and not only dabbed his little face with the sticky mess, but spilt the rest of its contents over his clean white frock; so that altogether nurse and Sally had some cause for annoyance, and they both heaved a sigh of relief when the little girls tied on their shady garden hats and ran out into the grounds.

"Now, my dears, everything is in beautiful order for Master Humphrey," said nurse, "and you can have a good frolic in the hayfield if you have a mind, only be sure you come back in time for dinner at one o'clock."

"What a silly nursie is," said Hester to her sister when they reached the garden. "She thinks we have done enough to welcome our darling Humphrey; why, we haven't done half enough, nor quarter enough, have we, Nan?"

"I suppose not," said Nan in a dubious tone. "We have worked very hard though, and we have put up two wreaths of coloured paper over the mantelpiece in the day-nursery, and there are three '*Welcomes*' stuck here and there, and I was finishing the third '*Hurrah for the Conquering Hero!*' when nurse sent us both out of doors. We did a good lot I think, and the place looks rather nice."

"It doesn't look at all nice," replied Hetty. "It shows how ignorant you are, Nan. You don't suppose a boy like Humphrey—a boy who has been to school, and has had measles, and won prizes for not being a dunce, would care for such silly preparations as that."

"I forgot about Humphrey having the measles," said Nan in a reflective tone, "he's sure to boast a good lot about how brave he was, and how he took his medicine without a word, and perhaps he will not care so much about paper wreaths and little flags and that kind of thing."

"He won't care a bit about them," said Hetty, "and you and I have just got to sit down on the grass here and think of something he *will* care about. Let's put our fingers to our lips and think very hard, and perhaps if we shut our eyes it might be all the better."

Nan, notwithstanding her five minutes' seniority, always followed Hetty's lead, and though no very brilliant thoughts occurred to her, even with her fingers to her lips and her eyes shut, yet she did not venture to make any remark until Hetty clapped her hands and sprang suddenly to her feet.

"I have it!" exclaimed the little girl. "I have thought of the dearest, darlingest welcome in the world. Nan, have you got any money?"

"I have got three pennies," said Nan, "and a crooked halfpenny, and four farthings, and a little, little threepenny-bit with a hole in it."

"And I," continued Hetty, "have got sixpence with a hole in it, and one farthing. Dear, dear, I wonder how much money we have got between us! Let's try and count on our fingers. You count on my fingers, Nan. Here's my thumb, that's for the three pennies; my first finger, that's the crooked halfpenny; my longest finger, that finger will mean your four farthings, Nan, and my third finger, will be your nice, tiny threepenny-bit with the hole in it. My little finger is my own sixpence, and the thumb of my left hand is my farthing. Dear, dear, it's very puzzling, even to count it on one's fingers. How much do you make it out to be, Nan?"

"I don't make it out to be anything," said Nan, "except a lot of fingers—and I think sums are very puzzling indeed done that way. I'll run and fetch my money-box, Hetty, and yours too. I don't think it's much matter how much our money comes to, for we haven't got any more. I'll run and fetch our money, and then you must tell me what your plan is."

Nan trotted off on her rather sturdy, fat legs to the house, and Hester watched expectantly, her eyes sparkling with excitement and fun.

"Oh, won't Nan be frightened and isn't it a darling, jolly treat!" she said to herself. "Even though Humphrey has had the measles he won't laugh at Nan and me after we've done this to welcome him. I expect he'll be rather glad, for he'll be able to see how much we think of him, and there's nothing in all the world conquering-heroes like so much as having respect shown to them."

In a few moments Nan returned with the two money-boxes.

"Nan," said Hester, jumping softly up and down and taking her little sister's hands between her own, "are you ready to do something very brave for the sake of Humphrey?"

"I suppose so," said Nan; "I don't a bit know what you mean, Hetty. I'll give up all my money which I like so much; is not that a brave enough thing to do?"

"No, it isn't" said Hester; "that's a very, very small part of what's before you and me just now, Nan. We have just an hour before dinner, and we can do it in one hour, if only you will promise not to be a silly. If you'll promise to keep very tight hold of me, and not to mind when the dogs bark, nor when the black old woman rushes out of her tent, nor when the dirty children scream, why, we'll get our grand welcome. We'll spend our money on our welcome and we'll bring our welcome home with us, and when he's having his tea to-night, when he's eating his bread and butter and gobbling up his strawberries, he'll find out what we've done for him, and he'll know what we think of our own darling. Oh dear, oh dear, I'm almost too happy—come away, Nan, come away!"

"But where are we to go to?" asked Nan, who was of a very stolid and matter-of-fact disposition.

"Oh, out through the garden gate and across the common."

"But, Hetty, mother does not allow us to go across the common without leave."

Hester stood still for a moment with a cloud on her face.

"But mother is not at home, you silly Nan. How can we ask her leave when she's miles and miles away; and I am quite certain" she added, putting on a very wise expression "she'd say yes to-day. If she knew what we are going about, and that all our money is to be spent, and that it is for Humphrey she could not help being pleased. Oh, do come, Nan. Please, please come!"

Thus adjured Nan yielded, and the two little girls set off running across the common, Hester full of her brilliant idea, and Nan following her in blind wonder and some fear, for Hester had thrown out such dark hints with regard to dogs and black old women and dirty children.

CHAPTER II.

THE common was covered with gorse which was still in bloom. There were also many other wild flowers; heaps and heaps of field daisies, and sweet little robin-run-the-hedge, and a good many varieties of the common orchis. Hester and Nan, who dearly loved flowers, could have spent hours on this beautiful breezy common, but on this occasion Hester was too full of her project to care to linger, and Nan was quite willing to stay close to her sister, for the gorse pricked her little bare legs when she ventured too near, and she could not tell how soon she and Hetty might come in contact with the dreadful old woman and the dogs.

She trotted therefore very soberly by her younger sister's side, having implicit faith in Hester's guiding genius.

The common was interspersed with innumerable narrow paths which led through the brilliant gorse which stood high in its golden glory on either side.

"Hester, what is it?" asked Nan, at last. "Where are we going? and what are we going to do with all our darling money which took so long to save?"

"We are going to find the girl with the tambourine," said Hester. "She's sure to live with the black old gypsy woman and the dirty children and the dogs. We are going to find her, and to give her all the money in our boxes if only she will come home with us."

"Oh, dear, oh dear," said Nan, half crying, "but I don't want the girl with the tambourine—I don't know anything about her, and I can't make out what you are thinking about, Hetty. What has a girl with a tambourine to do with our Humphrey?"

"You are a silly," said Hester in a tone of withering contempt. "What has a girl with a tambourine to do with Humphrey! Well, you just stand there before me Nan, and I'll tell you. I'll let it all out. I expect you will open your eyes wide, and you'll be awfully astonished, and you'll say to yourself, 'Hetty is wise—Hetty knows how to do things nearly as perfectly as mother does.' I don't want to praise myself, Nan, and I'm only saying this just to give you a hint about the way you ought to think about me. Now then, about—about—"

"The girl with the tambourine" said Nan in an impatient voice.

"Oh, yes; of course. Well then—one day I was driving into Weston with father and mother—you were there too, but perhaps you didn't look—anyhow I looked, and I saw a little girl standing by the roadside. She had on a scarlet petticoat the same colour as the soldiers' uniforms, and she had little bare legs, and no shoes on her poor little dusty feet, and she had a creamy white jacket on, only it wasn't very creamy because it was so dirty, and she had a turban twisted round her head with lots of colours in it, orange and blue and purple, and heaps more colours which I forget. She was standing by the roadside, the little girl was, and she had a tambourine in her hand. When we drove by in the carriage she began to spin the tambourine round on her fingers, and to make such a funny tinkling sound with it, and she sang a very pretty song, and she danced with her poor little dusty bare feet until father threw her sixpence. There, Nan, that's the story of the girl with the tambourine. Now you know all about it: come on, do."

"I'm sure I don't know anything" sighed poor Nan. "I do think Hetty's the most confusing girl."

She said nothing more however aloud, for she was accustomed to her little sister's vagaries, and she had still sufficient faith in Hetty to expect some brilliant termination to come out of the present chaos.

Suddenly Hester stood still and clapped her hands.

"There, there!" she exclaimed, "there are the tents, and there's the wicked old black woman. Oh, she has a pipe in her mouth, and there are the dogs—three dogs. Oh, they'll soon begin to bark! Well, I don't care. And there are the dirty children. Now Nan, come on; you needn't be a bit frightened—you can take hold of me, and I'll lead you. We'll soon find the girl with the tambourine now, Nan."

"Oh dear me!" half sobbed Nan, "I didn't know you were going to the gypsies—I'm dreadfully afraid of the gypsies. No, no, Hester, I won't go—indeed, indeed, I won't. You may go on all by yourself, Hetty, if you like, but I wouldn't go near that dreadful old black gypsy woman."

"All right" said Hester, after a moment's pause. "You can lie down behind that furze bush, and wait until I come back. You just give me your money-box, and I'll carry both our money-boxes in

my hand and go up to the tent. I'm not afraid of nothing—I'm not. Good-bye, Nan—the girl and I will be back soon."

Hester in her white frock, coral-pink sash and pretty little washing hat, now walked boldly up the path which led to the gypsies' encampment. In each of her hands she held a gaily-painted money-box and she made a sufficiently imposing little picture to cause several gypsy men to come out and stare at her, and to make some children dash inside the tents with little cries of wonder.

There were three conical shaped tents in the encampment, and at the door of the principal and largest of the three sat the gypsy wife whom Hester had spoken of to Nan as the black old woman. This dame now rose to her feet, removed her long pipe from her lips, called back the dogs which were beginning to clamour loudly and went up to the little girl.

"Now what may my pretty little miss be wanting?" she asked in a whining and slightly fawning voice, stooping as she spoke over the child.

Poor little Hester certainly had plenty of courage, but she rather shrank from such close contact with the gypsy mother.

"If you please," she said (and as she spoke she could not help almost wishing herself back at Nan's side) "if you please, does the girl with the tambourine live in your tent?"

A man had now joined the old woman and was about to reply with an exclamation of wonder when she gave him a very quick, wicked, and warning look. Then she replied in a gentle tone,

"The girl with the tambourine? Yes, of course, darling, she's resting herself at this moment in the back tent."

"Oh, I am so glad," said Hester, whose fears were now growing less, and her hope and courage returning. "I felt sure she must be with you. I want her so badly, please. I hope she is nicely dressed, the same as she was that day I saw her on the road. Has she her red petticoat on, and her cream jacket, and her turban with lots of colours in it? I want to see her so badly—I'm longing to see her."

"And so you shall, my dear," said the man; "she'll come out presently, her and her tambourine. What was you wanting with her, missy, if I may make so bold as to ask?"

"Oh," said Hester, "I want her for something most important, I wouldn't have come here, and Nan wouldn't—oh—oh—I mean that I want the girl, and she is to come back with me to the White Lodge. I am Colonel Egerton's little daughter, perhaps you have heard of my papa?—and I have got a brother called Humphrey, and he is coming home from school to-day. He's a great, great hero, Humphrey is; he has had measles, and he took a prize at school, and Nan and I have been making paper wreaths, and doing lots of important things to show how glad we are that he is coming home, and we want the girl with the tambourine to come too—we want her to come back with us to the White Lodge. We'll hide her in the garden, and we'll feed her with lots and lots of strawberries, and we'll save our own seed-cake for her that we get every day after dinner. She'll like seed-cake and strawberries, won't she? And then when Humphrey is at his tea we'll fly down stairs, and we'll bring her up, and we'll take her into the playroom, and she shall spin her tambourine and dance, and sing 'See the Conquering Hero Comes.' I do hope she knows that air, and that she's a clever girl."

"She's a very clever girl" replied the man, who kept gazing at Hester with more and more approval while she was speaking, and who nodded several times to the old woman whose eyes grew particularly sharp and hungry and beady-looking when Hester spoke of hiding the girl in the garden.

"She's a very clever girl," repeated the man, "ain't she, mother?"

"The cleverest I ever met with," responded the gypsy mother, "and it is a right down beautiful thought of miss's, and that considerate for her brother. Why, it almost draws tears from my eyes. Only if I might make bold to say what the girl with the tambourine would *like*, missy, it is to hide away in the hen-house. The girl is subject to rheumatiz, and can't sit under no trees, but in the hen-house she'll be as snug as possible, and she'll keep a sharp look out that none of the eggs are stolen, missy."

"If the little lady wouldn't mind stepping inside the tent we can soon settle matters satisfactorily to all parties," added the man.

CHAPTER III.

HESTER'S heart did beat rather more quickly than its wont when she found herself inside

the queer dirty tent where the gypsies lived. A kettle was swung in the orthodox gypsy fashion over the fire just outside the tent, and as the gypsy wife pushed Hetty inside she lifted the lid from the kettle, and stirred its contents with a long stick. A very savoury smell came to Hetty's nostrils and made her remember that dinner would soon be ready at home.

"I must be quick, please," she said to the woman, "for my dinner is waiting, and I am getting hungry. Please may the girl come with me at once?"

"Well, missy, as soon as we has struck our bargain. You don't suppose that poor girl will take her tambourine with her and spend her day hiding away in the hen-house all for nothing. She makes a good lot of money, does the girl, with standing by the roadside and twirling her tambourine and dancing. Sixpences and shillings is thrown to her most every half-hour, and she makes a good lot one way or another. She's an orphan, is the tambourine girl, and she has six little brothers and sisters to support, and they suffers from hunger awful. What bargain will you make with the tambourine girl, missy?"

"Two money-boxes," said Hester, holding up both her hands, and pushing the gaudy boxes into the old woman's eager fingers. "There's three pennies, and a crooked halfpenny, and four farthings, and a threepenny-bit with a hole in it in one of the boxes, and there's sixpence with a hole in it, and one farthing in the other—it's a good lot of money, isn't it?"

"I don't think it's a lot of money at all," said the gypsy woman, ruthlessly breaking open the pretty boxes, and tossing the money about in a discontented fashion on her palm. "I calls it a very shabby lot of money, and you couldn't expect the tambourine girl to come for that, no, not by no means."

Hester's little face became very blank.

"We have nothing more, Nan and me, haven't," she said, tears rising to her eyes.

The gypsy wife pretended to soften at the sight of the tears.

"Well, dearie," she said, "I quite understand the feelings of a little miss when she wants to do honour to her fine manly young brother home from public school, and it isn't me that would like to damp your ardour, and if so be that you'll

give me that faded bit of ribbon round your waist, why I'll close the bargain, and the girl shall go."

"But my sash is quite new," said Hester, in a tone of some alarm.

"Well, well, missy, just as you pleases; it ain't worth much, anyhow."

"And it cost eighteen shillings, I heard mother say so."

"It was throwing money into the fire, my dear. Here's the tambourine girl, but she may go back again to her tent."

"Oh, please," said Hester tearing off her sash, "do let her come; here's my pink sash, you may have it with pleasure. Oh, how the tambourine girl has grown!"

She had indeed—she was a stalwart looking woman of about five and twenty, with black hair and black beady eyes. Hester also thought her face wonderfully altered, but when she looked at her feet and saw that they were dusty, and that her petticoat was red, and that she carried a tambourine in her hand, and wore a turban on her head, she was fain to believe that she must be her own tambourine girl, and she bade the gypsy wife a cheerful good-bye, and trotted off to meet Nan followed by the girl. Her little heart was beating high with a sense of triumph, and she thought nothing at all of having given away her sash.

"How very much you must suffer from growing pains, tambourine girl," she said once, facing round on her companion.

"Eh? What is little miss trying to say?" asked the girl in a very gruff tone.

"Why, you have grown half a foot in a fortnight, and you are so much stouter, and your face is greatly altered."

"Eh? Eh?" replied the girl. "It's the fine growing weather I suppose. Eh, now, who's that?" as Nan emerged from under the furze bush.

Nan wore a blue sash which the girl instantly seized.

"I must have that too" she said. "Here, give it to me."

Poor Nan felt inclined to scream, but Hester whispered in an authoritative tone,

"She's a very nice girl, and it's in the bargain that she's to have our sashes."

The tambourine girl walked very fast, and Hester and Nan had some difficulty in keeping up with her.

"Can you sing?" called out Hester suddenly. "Can you sing, 'See the Conquering Hero Comes'? Oh, I hope, I hope you can."

Here the girl faced round quickly.

"Are there many hens in the hen-house, little missy?" she asked.

"Why, of course there are. But can you sing?"

"And nice little pullets fit for roasting and boiling?"

"Yes, of course."

"And heaps of eggs?"

"Oh, yes; quantities."

"Good," said the tambourine girl. "Take me to the hen-house as quick as you can, and you'll see about my singing by and by."

CHAPTER IV.

SOMEHOW nurse had never missed the sashes, and the little girls spent the rest of the day in a feverish state of expectation. All the long, hot afternoon they worked hard in Humphrey's cause, and when at last in the cool of the evening the Conquering Hero did arrive, all the nursery part of the house was in apple-pie order, and Nan and Hester in clean white frocks and sashes of pale gold colour looked as sweet a little pair as ever greeted a brother. Humphrey was delighted to be home again and nurse was charmed to see him. The nursery tea-table was a sight to behold, and at last the moment arrived when Nan and Hester were to slip from the room and fetch up the tambourine girl. With their hearts beating, and their cheeks bright with excitement, they flew hand in hand across the shrubbery and burst open the door of the hen-house. Here they were greeted, not by the tambourine girl, but by John the stable boy.

"Why, Miss Nan and Miss Hetty, what are you after?"

"Oh, John, we're looking for the tambourine girl. Where is she, where is she? We want her at once."

"The tambourine girl!" said John in a bewildered way.

"Yes, yes; we brought her away from the gypsies' tents this morning, and she has been hiding here ever since, and she's to come with us at once up to the playroom. She has got to dance and tinkle the tambourine, and sing 'See the Conquering Hero Comes.' Where is she, John?"

"*That* accounts for it, then," said John, "*that* explains matters; you don't know what you have done, you two young ladies. A tambourine girl, indeed! Well, tambourine girl or not, she has made off with four of the speckled hens, and all the eggs that were laid this afternoon, and two pairs of chickens that were getting ready for the table next week; and *she's* not here, bless you, she's away across the common by now. There, young ladies don't keep me, I must go and try to catch the thief."

But John never caught the tambourine girl, for by the time he reached the gypsies' encampment the gypsies themselves had departed, taking their tents and their baggage and the little girls' sashes and their money-boxes and their money; the tambourine girl, too, with the nice fat chickens and the speckled hens and the fresh eggs had disappeared in their company. She was never heard of again. Poor Hester and Nan had but a sorry triumph. Mother, however, when she heard the whole story would not punish them, for she said they had punished themselves. Their disobedience had brought its own punishment, and she was thankful that things were not worse, and that they had not suffered more severely through the gypsies.