North Grace May

Nan of the Gypsies

Grace North

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I.
GYPSY NAN

One glorious autumn day, when the pale mellow gold of the sunshine softened the ruggedness of the encircling mountains and lay caressingly on the gnarled live oaks, on the sky-reaching eucalyptus, and on the red-berried pepper trees, a tinkling of bells was heard on the long highway that led into the little garden village of San Seritos, half asleep by the gleaming blue Pacific. A gypsy caravan, consisting of three covered wagons drawn by teams of six mules, and followed by a string of horses, drew to one side of the road and stopped. A band of nut-brown, fox-like children scrambled down and began to race about, the older ones gathering sticks for the camp fire which they knew would soon be needed.

Four men, aquiline nosed, and with black hair hanging in ringlets to their shoulders, and as many women, gaudily dressed, with red and yellow silk handkerchiefs wound about their heads, prepared to make camp for the night.

It was a fittingly picturesque spot for a clump of gnarled live oaks grew about a spring of clear, cold water, which, fed from some hidden source, was never dry.

A quarter of a mile away lay the first of the beautiful estates and homes of Spanish architecture, for which San Seritos was far famed.

One of the gypsy women paused at her task to shade her eyes and gaze back over the highway as though expecting someone.

A mis-shapen goblin-like boy tugged on her sleeve, and with a wistful expression in his dark eyes, he whispered, “Manna Lou, Nan hasn’t run away again, has she?”

“I don’ no,” the gypsy answered, drearily. “Maybe yes and maybe not.”

A moment later, when the woman had returned to her task, there was a screaming of delight among the fox-like children, and Tirol, the mis-shapen boy, cried in a thrill glad voice, “Here she comes, Manna Lou! Here comes Gypsy Nan.”

Toward them down the mountain drive, galloping on a spirited mottled pony, rode a beautiful young girl of thirteen, her long black hair, straight to her shoulders, suddenly broke into a riot of ringlets and hung to her waist. Her gown and headdress were as bright as maple leaves in Autumn, and her dark brown eyes were laughing with merriment and mischief.

As she sprang from her pony, the gypsy children leaped upon her, uttering animal-like cries of joy, but Tirol, hobbling to her side, caught her warm brown hand in his thin claw-like one and looked up at her with adoration in his hungering black eyes as he said: “I was ’fraid, Sister Nan, ’fraid you had gone again, and maybe this time for good.”

The gypsy girl knelt impulsively and caught the mis-shapen boy in her arms, and her eyes flashed as she said passionately: “Little Tirol, Nan will never, never go for good as long as you need her to protect you from that wicked Anselo Spico. I hate him, hate him, because he abuses a poor boy who can’t grow strong and defend himself, but he won’t strike you again, little Tirol, unless he strikes me first.”

“Hush!” warningly whispered Cyra, a small gypsy girl. “Here comes Spico. He’s been ahead to look over the village.”

It was evident by the suspending work in the camp that the approaching horseman was someone of importance in their midst. A Romany rye was he, dressed in blue corduroy with a scarlet sash at his waist and a soft scarlet ribbon knotted about his broad brimmed felt hat.

His dark, handsome face, which, when in repose had an expression of either vanity or cruelty, was smiling as he dismounted from his spirited black horse.

Gypsy Nan, who had been standing in the shadow of a live oak with protecting arms about the goblin-like Tirol breathed a sigh of relief, for the hated Spico was evidently in the best of spirits. He called gayly after the tall gypsy lad who was leading his horse away: “Soobli, where is Mizella, your queen? Call her forth, I have good news to tell.”

While he was talking the curtains of the largest van were pushed apart, an old hag-like gypsy appeared, and, with much groaning, made her way down the wooden steps to the ground. There she leaned heavily on a cane, and hobbling toward her son, asked eagerly: “What’s the pickings like to be, Spico? Is it a rich gorigo town?”

“Rich, Mother Mizella?” the handsome young rye repeated. “The gorigo around here has his pockets lined with gold and will spend it freely if he is amused. You women dress in your gayest and start out tomorrow with your tambourines. You will gather in much money with your fortune telling and we men in the village will not be idle.”

Then, going to the camp fire, over which a small pig was being roasted, he asked, looking around sharply. “Where is leicheen Nan? If she has run away again, I’ll – ”

“No, no, Nan hasn’t run away,” the gypsy woman, Manna Lou, hastened to say. “She’s here, Spico. Come Nan, dearie,” she called pleadingly. “Come and speak pleasant.”

The girl, with a defiant flashing of her dark eyes, stepped out of the shadow of a low-branching live oak and stood in the full light of the camp fire.

“Leicheen Nan,” the Romany rye said, and his words were a command, “tomorrow you will go to the village and dance at the gorigo inn. You have idled long enough.”

It was the gypsy woman, Manna Lou, who replied. “Not yet, Spico,” she implored in a wheedling tone – “Nan is only a little gothlin. Wait until she is grown.”

Before the angered young rye could answer, Mizella hobbled to the camp fire and snarled angrily: “I am queen. My word is law. That good-for-nothing leicheen Nan shall do as my son says.”

The girl stepped back into the shadow, her heart rebellious. She said nothing, but she was determined that she would not obey.

The men then sat about the fire and were served by the women, who, with the children afterwards ate what was left.

The moon came up, and Nan, nymph-like, danced up a grassy hill back of the camp. A throng of wild, fox-like little children scrambled up after her. “A story. Tell us a story, Nanny,” they called. The girl paused, turned and seeing the crippled Tirol struggling to climb the hill, she ran back, lifted him to her strong young shoulder and carried him to the top of the knoll. There they all sat together, many bright black eyes watching while Nan told them a story. A fanciful tale it was of how a gypsy princess had been cruelly treated by a wicked man like Anselo Spico. How he had shut the princess and six other gypsy girls, who had defied him, in a van without horses and had let it roll down a cliff road into the sea. “But they were not drowned, for the spirits of the sea-spray carried them up to the sky, and any clear night you can see that gypsy princess and the six gypsy girls dancing in their bright crimson and gold shawls and you call it the sun-set.”

Tirol, always the most intense of Nan’s listeners leaned forward and asked in a low whisper: “What did the sea-spray spirits do to – to that wicked Romany rye?”

“That night,” the gypsy girl said in a low voice of mystery, “he went to the top of a cliff to make sure the van had gone into the sea, and it had, for it lay broken in the surf. Then the sea-spray spirits lifted a wave as high as a hill and it swept over the cliff and that wicked Romany rye was seen no more.”

Tirol's black eyes glowed in the moonlight and his frail hand was trembling as Nan took it to lift him again to her shoulder.

"Steal back soft-like, so he won't know we left camp," she warned. Crouching low, the file of little fox-like children crept back of trees and brush until the vans were reached, then darted between the flaps and crawled, without undressing, into their bunk-like beds, all but Nan and Tirol. The gypsy girl felt smothered if she slept in the van.

CHAPTER II.
THE GARDEN-ALL-AGLOW

Before day break, Gypsy Nan awakened the goblin-like boy. Rolled in blankets they had slept in the shelter of the live oak trees and close to the warm coals of the camp fire.

"Come Tirol," she whispered, glancing at the wagons, to see if anyone was astir, "we must go now, for Nan isn't going to dance at the inn for the gorigo. And you must come, too, else that wicked Anselo Spico will make you stand on a corner and beg, making money out of your poor little bent body that's always a-hurting you."

With many backward glances the two children stole away to where the mules and ponies were corralled. After carefully lifting the frail boy to the back of the mottled horse, Binnie, Nan mounted, and together they galloped down the coast highway. The last star had faded, the grey in the East was brightening, and then suddenly the sun, in a burst of glory appeared and the sky and sea flamed rose and amethyst. The dark eyes of the girl glowed with appreciation and joy, and she started singing a wild, glad song to a melody of her own creating.

They had gone perhaps a mile from camp and away from the town when Nan suddenly drew rein and listened. She heard the beating of hoofs behind them, but the riders were hidden by the curve in the road.

Whirling her pony's head she turned down into a canyon that led to the shore. There she concealed her horse and with Tirol she lay close to the sand.

Two horsemen passed on the highway, and, as she had surmised, one was Anselo Spico. She thought they were hunting for her but she was mistaken. In the village the Romany rye had heard of a rich gorigo whose horses were of the finest breed and whose stables were but slightly guarded, and it was to inspect this place that they were going.

True, Mizella's son had noticed Nan's absence that morning but he knew that she would return and he was planning a cruel punishment which he would administer for her defiance and disobedience.

Nan remained in hiding until she could no longer hear the beating of the hoofs, then she said gaily – "Look Tirol, the sand is hard on the beach. I'll lift you up again, dearie, and we'll ride along by the sea."

The boy laughed happily as they rode, so close to the waves that now and then one broke about the pony's feet, and the girl laughed, too, for it is easy to forget troubles when one is young.

They soon came to a beautiful estate where the park-like grounds reached the edge of the gleaming white sand, but it was surrounded by a hedge so high that even on the small horse's back the children could not see over it.

"Tirol," Nan exclaimed, "no one could find us here, and so close up to this high hedge, we'll have our breakfast."

Leaping from the pony the girl, with tender compassion, carefully lifted down the mis-shapen boy, then opening a bundle tied in a red handkerchief, she gave him a thick slice of brown bread and a piece of roasted pig, which she had stored away the evening before.

"Look! Look!" cried the boy, clapping his claw-like hands. "The birds are begging, Nanny, let Tirol feed them."

Like a white cloud shining in the sun the sea gulls winged down from the sky. Gypsy Nan leaped to her feet and ran with outstretched arms to greet them, and the white birds fearlessly circled about her as she tossed crumbs into the air, and one, braver than the others lighted on Tirol's outstretched hand and pecked at his breakfast.

When at last this merry feast was over, the sea gulls flew away, and Nan called merrily, "Tirol, maybe there's something beautiful behind the hedge that's so high. Let's go through it, shall we?"

The deformed boy nodded. Many an exciting adventure he and Nan had when they ran away. But the gypsy children found that the hedge was as dense as it was high, and though it was glowing with small crimson flowers, it was also bristling with thorns and nowhere was there space enough for them to break through.

Suddenly Nan, who had danced ahead, gave a little cry of delight. “Here’s the gate, Tirol!” she called. “It opens on the beach.”

Eagerly the girl lifted the latch and to her joy the gate swung open. She leaped within and the boy followed her. Then for one breathless moment Gypsy Nan stood with clasped hands and eyes aglow, as she gazed about her.

Never before had she seen so wonderful a garden. There were masses of crysanthemums, golden in the sunlight, and, too, there were banks of flaming scarlet. In the midst of it all, glistening white in the sunshine, was a group of marble nymphs, evidently having a joyous time sporting in the fern-encircled pool, while a flashing of rainbow colors showered about them from the fountain. A mockingbird sang in the pepper tree near the house but there was no other sound.

“Let’s find the gorigo lady that lives here,” Nan whispered. “Maybe she’d let me tell her fortune. Anselo Spico won’t be so angry if we take back a silver dollar.”

Up the flowered path, the gypsy children went, but, though Nan fearlessly lifted the heavy wrought iron knocker on the door nearest the garden and on the one at the side, there was no response.

Returning to the garden, the girl stooped and passionately kissed a glowing yellow crysanthemum.

“Nan loves you! Nan loves you bright, beautiful flower!” she said in a low tense voice, “Nan would like to keep you.”

“If you’re wantin’ it, why don’t you take it?” t Tirol asked. “Spico an’ the rest, they always take what they want when they can get it easy.”

The girl turned upon the small boy as she said almost fiercely. “Haven’t I told you time and again that ’tisn’t honest to steal? Don’t matter who does it, ’tisn’t right, Tirol. Manna Lou said my mother wouldn’t love me if I stole or lied. An’ I won’t steal! I won’t lie! I won’t.”

Many a time Nan had been well beaten because she would not do these things which so often Anselo Spico had commanded.

Then, noting how the small boy shrank away as if frightened, the girl knelt and held him close in a passionate embrace. “Tirol!” she implored, “Little Tirol, don’t be scared of Nan. ’Twasn’t you she was fierce at. ’Twas him as makes every-body and all the little ones lie and steal. All the little ones that don’t *dare* not because he would beat them.”

The girl felt Tirol’s frail body trembling in her clasp. “There, there, dearie. You needn’t be afraid. Anselo Spico don’t *dare* to beat you. He knows if he did, I’d kill him.”

Then there was one of the changes of mood that were so frequently with Nan. Kissing Tirol, she danced away, flinging her body in wild graceful movements. Up one path she went, and down another. Catching up the tambourine which always hung at her belt, she shook it, singing snatches of song until she was quite tired out. Then, sinking down on a marble bench, she held Tirol close and gazed up at the windows of the house. One after another she scanned but no face appeared.

Had the proud, haughty owner of that house been at home, she would have felt that her grounds were being polluted by the presence of a gypsy.

Suddenly Nan sprang up and held out her hand for the frail claw-like one of the mis-shapen boy.

“No need to wait any longer. There’s no lady here to get a dollar from for telling her fortune, – an’ I’m glad, glad! Fortunes are just lies! I hate telling fortunes!”

Down the path they went toward the little gate in the high hedge which opened out upon the beach. Turning, before she closed it, the girl waved her free hand and called joyfully. “Good-bye flowers of gold, Nan’s coming back some day.”

CHAPTER III.
GOOD-BYE LITTLE TIROL

The gypsy children returned toward the camp just as the sun was setting. “Aren’t you ’fraid that Spico’ll strike us?” the goblin-like boy asked, holding close to Nan as the small, mottled pony galloped along the coast road.

“No; I’m not scared,” Nan said. “If he strikes us, we’ll run away for good.”

“Could we go back and live in that garden?”

“I don’t know where we’d go. Somewheres! Maybe up there.” Nan pointed and the boy glanced at the encircling mountains where the canyons were darkening. Surely they would be well hidden there. They were close enough now to see the smoke curling up from the camp fire near the clump of live oaks.

Leaving the small horse in the rope corral with the others, the children approached the wagons, keeping hidden behind bushes as best they could. Nan wanted to see who was about the fire before she made her presence known. The one whom she dreaded was not there and so she boldly walked into the circle of the light, leading Tirol. Then she spoke the gypsies’ word of greeting: “Sarishan, Manna Lou.”

“Leicheen Nan, dearie, how troubled my heart has been about you,” the gypsy woman said. “You ran away. I thought forever.”

“Where is Anselo Spico?” the girl inquired.

“He hasn’t come yet. Mizella’s been asking this hour back. He said at high sun he’d be here sure, more than likely he’s been – ”

“Hark!” Nan whispered, putting a protecting arm about the boy. “Hide, quick, Tirol, here he comes.”

But only one horseman appeared, galloping through the dusk, and that one was Vestor, who had ridden away with the Romany rye that morning. His dark face told them nothing and yet they knew that he had much to tell. They gathered about him, but before he could speak, the old queen pushed her way to the front. “Where’s my son?” she demanded.

“In jail for tryin’ to steal a rich gorigo’s horse.” Then Vestor added mysteriously. “But he’ll join us afore dawn, I’m tellin’ you! Break camp at once,” he commanded. “We’re to wait for Spico in a mountain canyon on t’other side of town. I know where ’tis. I’ll ride the leader.”

The supper was hastily eaten, the fire beaten out, the mules and horses watered and hitched. Just as the moon rose over the sea, the gypsy caravan began moving slowly down the coast highway.

Nan, riding on her mottled pony, sincerely wished that Anselo Spico would not escape, but he always did, as she knew only too well.

Two hours later the caravan stopped on a lonely mountain road and drew to one side. Half an hour later everyone was asleep, but in the middle of the night Nan was awakened by a familiar voice.

Anselo Spico had returned.

Long before daybreak the gypsy caravan was once more under way. The jolting of the wagon of Manna Lou roused the girl. She climbed from her berth and looked in the one lower to see if all was well with little Tirol. Two big black eyes gazed out at her and one of the claw-like hands reached toward her. Nan took it lovingly.

“Little Tirol,” she said, “you aren’t feeling well.” The goblin-like boy shook his head as he replied: “A crooked back hurts, Sister Nan. It hurts all the time.”

“I know – I know dearie!” the girl said tenderly gathering the little fellow close in her arms. “Wait, Nan will bring you some breakfast.” But the boy turned away and wearily closed his eyes.

The caravan had stopped long enough to make a fire and prepare the morning coffee. Soon Manna Lou entered the wagon. “Go out, Nan darling,” she said. “Don’t fear Spico. He only thinks of getting across the border in safety.”

The girl beckoned to the gypsy woman and said in a low voice, “Little Tirol’s not so well. We’d ought to stop at the next town and fetch a doctor.”

“Poor little Tirol,” the gypsy woman said kindly. “You’ll be lonely, Nan, to have him go, but if the gorigo is right, if there is a heaven, then little Tirol’ll be happier, for there’s been no harm in him here. And there can’t be anyone so cruel as Anselo Spico’s been.”

Nan clenched her hands and frowned. Manna Lou continued. “Perhaps his own mother Zitha will be there waiting, and she’ll take care of him. Before she died, she gave me little Tirol and begged me to keep watch over him and I’ve done my best.”

Impulsively Nan put her arms about the gypsy woman as she said, “Manna Lou, how good, how kind you are! You’ve been just like a mother to little Tirol and me, too. Some day you’re going to tell me who my own mother was, aren’t you, Manna Lou?”

“Yes, leicheen Nan. When you’re eighteen, then I’m going to tell you. I promised faithful I wouldn’t tell before that.”

As the morning wore on, it was plain to the watchers that little Tirol was very ill and when at noon the caravan stopped, Nan, leaping from the wagon of Manna Lou confronted Anselo Spico as she said courageously: “Little Tirol is like to die. We’ve got to stop at that town down there into the valley and fetch a doctor.”

“Got to?” sneered the dark handsome man, then he smiled wickedly. “Since when is leicheen Nan the queen of this tribe that she gives commands? What we’ve got to do is cross over the border into Mexico before the gorigo police gets track of us.”

He turned away and Nan with indignation and pity in her heart, went back to the wagon. As she sat by the berth, holding Tirol’s hot hand, she determined that as soon as the village was reached she herself would ride ahead and find a doctor.

Manna Lou had tried all of the herbs, but nothing of which the gypsies knew could help the goblin-like boy or quiet his cruel pain.

It was mid-afternoon when Nan saw that the winding downward road was leading into a valley town. It would take the slow moving caravan at least an hour to reach the village, while Nan, on her pony, could gallop there very quickly. Not far below was a dense grouping of live oak trees. She would slip among them on Binnie and then, out of sight of the caravan, she would gallop across the fields to the town. “Manna Lou,” the girl said softly that she need not awaken the sleeping Tirol, “I’m going for a little ride.”

“That’s nice, dearie,” the kind gypsy woman replied. “It will do you good. The sunshine is warm and cheery.”

It was a rough road and the caravan was moving slowly. Many of the fox-like gypsy children were running alongside, and Nan joined them.

She wanted to be sure where Anselo Spico was riding. As she had hoped, he was on the driver’s seat of Queen Mizella’s wagon which was always in the lead.

Running back, she was about to mount her pony when she heard her name called softly. Turning, she saw Manna Lou beckoning to her. Springing to the home wagon, she went inside.

“What is it, Manna Lou?” she asked. “You look so strange.”

“We thought little Tirol was asleep all this time, and so he *was*, but it’s the kind of sleep that you don’t waken from. Maybe he’s in the gorigo heaven now with Zitha, his mother.”

The girl felt awed. “Why, Manna Lou,” she whispered, “little Tirol looks happier than I ever saw him before. See how sweetly he’s smiling.”

“Yes, dearie, he is happier, for his poor, crooked back was always hurting him, but he was a brave little fellow, cheerful and uncomplaining.”

The caravan stopped and Manna Lou went out to tell the others what had happened. The gypsy girl, alone with the boy who had so loved her, knelt by his side and kissing him tenderly, she said: “Little Tirol, darling, Nan has staid here and put up with the cruelty of Angelo Spico, just to be taking care of you, but now that you aren’t needing Nan any more, she’s going far away. Good-bye, dearie.”

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That night while the caravan was moving at a slow pace over the moonlit road and all save the drivers were asleep, Nan, slipped out of Manna Lou’s wagon, leaped to the back of Binnie and galloped back by the way they had come.

CHAPTER IV.
NAN ESCAPES

All night long Gypsy Nan, on the back of her small horse Binnie climbed the steep mountain road, a full moon far over her head transforming everything about her to shimmering silver.

A bundle tied in a beautiful shawl of scarlet and gold contained all that belonged to her and food enough to last for several days.

Nan was on the ridge of a mountain road when the sun rose, and to her joy saw the village of San Seritos lying in the valley below, and beyond was the gleaming blue sea.

She drew rein and gazed ahead wondering where she should go, when her ears, trained to notice all of nature's sounds, heard the startled cry of some little ground animal. Dismounting, she bent over the place from which the sound had come and saw an evil-eyed rattle-snake about to spring upon a squirrel that seemed powerless to get away.

Nan, whose heart was always filled with pity for creatures that were weak and helpless, threw a rock at the snake which glided into the underbrush. Then she lifted the squirrel, feeling its heart pounding against her hand. She carried the little thing across the road and placed it on an overhanging limb of a live oak tree.

"There now! Nan's given you a chance to get away from the snake. That's what Anselo Spico is, a rattle-snake, an' I'm trying to get away."

She was about to mount on her pony when she again paused and listened intently. This time she heard the galloping of a horse. Peering through the trees, back of her, she saw a black pony and its rider fairly plunging down the rough road on the opposite side of the canyon she had just crossed. In half an hour, perhaps less, that horse and rider would reach the spot where she was standing.

Nan's fears were realized. She was being pursued. The rider she knew even at that distance, to be Vestor, a cruel man who would do anything his master Anselo Spico commanded.

Where could she hide? It would have been easier if she had been alone, but it would not be a simple matter to conceal the pony. Mounting, the girl raced ahead. A turn in the mountain road brought her to a ranch. It was so very early that no one was astir. Riding in and trusting to fate to protect her, she went at once to a great barn and seeing a stack of hay in one corner, she wedged her pony back of it and stood, scarcely breathing, waiting for, she knew not what, to happen.

But, although the moments dragged into an hour, no one came. At last, unable to endure the suspense longer, the girl slipped from her hiding-place, and, keeping close to the wall of the old barn she sidled slowly toward a wide door. She heard voices not far away.

"You ain't seen nothing of a black-haired wench in a yellar an' red dress?"

It was Vestor speaking and it was quite evident that he was snarling angry. Nan peered through a knot-hole, her heart beating tempestuously. The gypsy's gimlet-like black eyes were keeping a sharp lookout all about him as he talked. The rancher's back was toward the girl. He, at first, quietly replied, but when Vestor took a step toward the barn, saying he'd take a look around himself, the brawny rancher caught his arm, whirled him about and pointed toward the road. "I'll have none of *your* kind prowlin' about *my* place. You'd lake a look, all right, but I reckon you'd take everything else that wa'n't held down wi' a ton of rock.

"I know the thievin', lying lot of you. I'd as soon shoot one of you down as I would a skunk, an' sooner, if 'twant for the law upholding of you, though gosh knows why it does." Then, as Vestor kept looking intently at the open barn door, the rancher, infuriated by the man's doggedly remaining when he had been told to be off, sprang toward a wagon, snatched a whip and began to lash the gypsy about the legs.

With cries of pain, Vestor turned an ugly visage toward the rancher, but meeting only determination and equal hatred, he thought better of his attempt to spring at him, turned, went to his black pony, mounted it and rode rapidly back the way he had come.

He didn't want to be too far behind the caravan fearing that the gorigo police might take *him* up and put him in jail on Anselo's offense.

The rancher stood perfectly still for sometime after the gypsy had ridden away, then he also turned and looked toward the barn. Nan had at once sidled to her place back of the hay stack and so she did not see that he slowly walked that way.

Stopping in the door he listened intently. Then shrugging his shoulders, he went into the house to his breakfast. Half an hour later he again sauntered to the barn door. "Gal," he called. "Hi, there, you gypsy gal! That black soul'd critter's gone this long while. Don't be afeard to come out. Ma's waitin' to give you some breakfast."

Surely Nan could trust a voice so kindly. Timidly she appeared, leading the pony who was munching a mouthful of hay. The rancher smiled at the girl in a way to set her fears at rest, at least as far as he was concerned, but once out in the open she glanced around wildly. – "Where is he? Where's that Vestor gone? Will he be back?"

For answer, the rancher motioned the girl to follow him. He led her to a high peak back of the barn. "You kin see from here to all sides," he said: "You lie low, sort of, behind that big rock an' keep watchin'. The scoundrel rode off that a-way. If he keep's a goin', you'll see him soon. If he turned back, well, I'll let out the dogs." Nan did as she had been told and from that high position, she soon saw, far across the canyon, riding rapidly to the south, the black pony bearing the man she feared.

She rose greatly relieved. "He's gone sure enough, Vestor has." Then, suspiciously she turned toward the man. "How did you know where I was?"

"I saw you go in," the rancher told her, "an' I was settin' outside waitin for you to come out with whatever 'twas, you'd gone in to steal."

A dark red mantled the girl's face, and she said in a low voice. "I don't steal an' I don't lie, but he does." She jerked her head in the direction Vestor had taken. "So do the rest, mostly, but, they don't all. Manna Lou don't steal and she don't lie. She fetched me up not to."

The girl's dark eyes looked into the penetrating grey eyes of the rancher with such a direct gaze that he believed her.

A woman appeared on the back porch and called to them. "Fetch the gal in for a bite of breakfast if she ain't too wild like."

"Thanks, but I don't want any breakfast," Nan said. Then, noting that Binnie was still chewing on the hay he had pulled from the stack, she added, – "I haven't any money, or I'd pay for what he's had. I couldn't keep him from eating it."

"Of course you couldn't, gal," the rancher said kindly. Then, as he saw that the girl was determined to mount her pony and ride away, he asked – "Where are you going to? I don't have to ask *what* you're running away from? I *know* that purty well."

The girl shook her head and without a smile, she again said "Thanks." Then, quite unexpectedly, for the man had seen her make no sign, the pony broke into a run and she was gone.

CHAPTER V.
NAN REVISITS THE GARDEN

For half an hour Nan rode, bent low in her saddle possibly with the thought that she would be less noticeable. Each time that the winding road brought her to an open place where she could see across the valley, she drew rein and gazed steadily at the ribbon-like trail which appeared, was lost to sight, and re-appeared for many miles to the south.

At last what she sought was seen, a horseman so small because of the distance that he appeared no larger than a toy going rapidly away. Sitting erect, the girl gazed down in the other direction and saw the garden city of San Seritos between the mountains and the sea.

"Ho, Binnie!" she cried, her black eyes glowing. "I know where we'll go. – Back to that beach place where the flowers of gold are."

And then, in the glory of the still early morning, with her black hair flying back of her, the girl in the red and yellow dress galloped down to the highway and rode around the village, that no-one might see her and arrest her because she was a gypsy.

There were but few astir at so early an hour, but the sun was high in the heavens when at last she reached the little ravine that led down to the sea.

This time she breakfasted alone in the shadow of the high hedge, and the shining white birds did not come.

"Perhaps they only came for little Tirol," she thought. Then springing up, she stretched her arms toward the gleaming blue sky as she said: "I do want little Tirol to be happy."

This was an impulse and not a prayer, for the gypsies had no religion, and Nan knew nothing really of the heaven of the gorigo.

Then, telling Binnie to wait for her she opened the gate and entered the garden. The masses of golden and scarlet bloom, the glistening of many colors in the fountain, the joyous song of birds in the red-berried pepper trees fascinated the gypsy girl, and she danced about like some wild thing, up and down the garden paths, pausing now and then to press her cheek passionately against a big yellow crysanthemum that stood nearly as tall as she, and to it she would murmur lovingly in strange Romany words.

She was following a path which she and Tirol had not found, suddenly she paused and listened. She had heard voices, and peering through the low hanging branches of an ornamental tree, she saw a pretty cottage by the side of great iron gates that stood ajar. Here lived the head gardener and his little family. A buxum, kindly faced young woman was talking to a small girl of seven.

"Now, Bertha, watch Bobbie careful," she was saying. "Mammy is going up to the big house. The grand ladies is comin' home today an' every-thin' must be spic and ready."

Nan darted deeper among the shrubs and bushes for the young woman passed so close that she could have touched her. The gypsy girl remained in hiding and watched the small children who looked strange to her with their flaxen hair and pink cheeks used as she was to the dark-eyed, black-haired, fox-like little gypsies.

The baby boy was a chubby laughing two-year-old, "Birdie," as he called his sister, played with him for a time on the grass in front of their cottage. At last, wearying of this, she said – "Now Bobby, you sit right still like a mouse while Birdie goes and fetches out her dollie."

Springing up, the little girl ran indoors. A second later a butterfly darted past the wee boy. Gurgling in delight, he scrambled to his feet and toddled uncertainly after it. Out through the partly-open iron gates he went, and then, tripping, he sprawled in the dust of the roadway. At that same instant Nan heard the chugging of an oncoming machine and leaping from her hiding place, she darted

through the gates and into the road. A big touring car was swerving around a corner. The frightened baby, after trying to scramble to his feet, had fallen again.

Nan, seizing him, hurled him to the soft grass by the roadside. Then she fell and the machine passed over her. The “grand ladies” had returned.

The car stopped almost instantly, and the chauffeur lifted the limp form of the gypsy girl in his arms.

“I don’t think she’s dead, Miss Barrington,” he said, “and if you ladies wish I’ll take her right to the county hospital as quickly as I can.”

The older woman spoke coldly. “No, I would not consider that I was doing my duty if I sent her to the county hospital. You may carry her into the house, Martin, and then procure a physician at once.”

“But, Miss Barrington, she’s nothing but a gypsy, and yours the proudest family in all San Seritos or anywhere for that,” the man said, with the freedom of an old servant.

Then, it was that the other lady spoke, and in her voice was the warmth of pity and compassion.

“Of course we’ll take the poor child into our home,” she said. “She may be only a gypsy girl, but no greater thing can anyone do than risk his own life for another.”

And so the seemingly lifeless Gypsy Nan was carried into the mansion-like home which stood in the garden-all-aglow that she had so loved.

CHAPTER VI.
ONLY A GYPSY-GIRL

When at last the girl opened her eyes, she looked about her in half dazed wonder. Where could she be? In a room so beautiful that she thought perhaps it was the gorigo heaven. The walls were the blue of the sky, and the draperies were the gold of the sun, while the wide windows framed glowing pictures of the sea and the garden.

For the first time in her roaming life, Nan was in a luxurious bed. Hearing the faint rustle of leaves at her side, she turned her head and saw a grey-haired, kindly faced woman, who was gowned in a soft silvery cashmere; a bow of pink fastened the creamy lace mantle about her shoulders. It was Miss Dahlia Barrington, who was reading a large book. Hearing a movement from the bed, she looked up with a loving smile, and closing the book, she placed it on a table and bent over the wondering eyed girl.

"Where am I, lady?" Nan asked.

"You are in the Barrington Manor, dear. My sister's home and mine. Do you not recall what happened?"

"Yes, lady, was the little boy hurt, lady?"

"Indeed not, thanks to you," Miss Dahlia said. "Tell me your name, dear, that I may know what to call you."

The girl's dark eyes grew wistful and she looked for a moment out toward the sea. Then she said in a very low voice. "I don't know my name, only just Nan." It was then she remembered that her race was scorned by the white gorigo, and, trying to rise, she added, "I must go now, lady. I must go back to Manna Lou. I'm only a gypsy. You won't want me here."

"Only a gypsy?" the little woman said gently, as she covered the brown hand lovingly with her own frail white one. "Dearie, you are just as much a child of God as I am or Miss Barrington is, or indeed, any-one."

Nan could not understand the words, for they were strange to her, but she could understand the loving caress, and, being weary, she again closed her eyes, but a few moments later she was aroused by a cold, unloving voice that was saying: "Yes, doctor, I understand that she is a gypsy, and that probably she will steal everything that she can lay her hands on, but I will have things locked up when she is strong enough to be about. I consider that she was sent here by Providence, and that it is therefore my duty to keep the little heathen and try to civilize and Christianize her."

It was the older Miss Barrington who was speaking. Nan, who had never stolen even a flower, was keenly hurt, and she determined to run away as soon as ever she could.

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The chimes of the great clock in the lower hall were musically telling the midnight hour when the girl, seemingly strengthened by her determined resolve, sat up in bed and listened intently.

She had heard a noise beyond the garden hedge, and her heart leaped joyously. It was Binnie, her mottled pony, calling to her. All day long he had been waiting for her.

"I'm coming, Binnie darling," the gypsy girl whispered. Then, climbing from the bed, she dressed quickly, and, fearing that if she opened the door she might be heard, she climbed through the window and on a vine covered trellis descended to the garden.

How beautiful it was in the moonlight, she thought, but she dared not pause. Down the path she sped and out at the gate in the hedge.

Binnie, overjoyed at seeing his mistress, whinnied again.

Gypsy Nan gave the small horse an impulsive hug as she whispered: “Binnie dearie, be quiet or some one will hear you. We must go away now, far, far away.”

The pony, seemingly to understand, trotted along on the hard sand with the gypsy girl clinging to his back, for the strength, which had seemed to come to her when she determined to run away, was gone and she felt weak and dazed. A few moments later she slipped from the pony’s back and lay unconscious on the sand while the faithful Binnie stood guard over her.

It was not until the next afternoon that she again opened her eyes and found herself once more in the beautiful blue and gold room and at her bedside sat the gentle Miss Dahlia gazing at her with an expression of mingled sorrow and loving tenderness.

“Little Nan,” she said, when she saw that the girl had awakened, “Why did you run away from me?”

“Not from you, lady, from the other one, who called me thief.”

Miss Dahlia glanced quickly toward the door as she said softly, “Dearie, my sister, Miss Barrington, has had many disappointments, and she seems to have lost faith in the world, but I am sure that she means to be kind.” Then the little lady added with a sigh, “I had so hoped you would want to stay with me, for I am very lonely now that Cherise is gone. She was nearly your age and this was her room, Shall I tell you about her?”

“Yes, lady.”

Miss Dahlia clasped the brown hand lovingly as she began.

“Long ago I had a twin brother, whom I dearly loved, but he married a very beautiful girl, who sang at concerts, and my sister, Miss Barrington, who sometimes seems unjust, would not receive her into our home, and my brother, who was deeply hurt, never communicated with us again. Many years passed and then one day a little girl of ten came to our door with a letter. She said that her name was Cherise and that her father and mother were dead. It was my dear brother’s child. My sister, Miss Barrington was in the city where she spends many of the autumn months, and so I kept the little thing and told no one about her. Those were indeed happy days for me. This room, which had dark furniture and draperies, I had decorated in blue and gold just for her, and how she loved it. With her golden curls and sweet blue eyes she looked like a fairy in her very own bower.

“Little Nan, you can’t know what a joy Cherise was to me. We spent long hours together in the garden with our books, for I would allow no one else to teach her, but, when she was fourteen, her spirits slipped away and left me alone. I thought when you came that perhaps Cherise had led you here that I might have someone to love. I do wish you would stay, at least for a while.”

Nan looked into the wistful, loving face and then she turned to gaze out of the window. She was silent for so long that Miss Dahlia was sure that she would say no, but when the gypsy girl spoke, she said: “I’ll stay until the gold flowers fade out there in the garden.”

“Thank you, dearie,” and then impulsively the little lady added: “Try to love me, Nan, and I am sure that we will be happy together.”

The days that followed were hard ones for the gypsy girl, who felt as a wild bird must when it is first imprisoned in a cage, and her heart was often rebellious.

“But I’ll keep my word,” she thought, “I’ll stay till the gold flowers fade.”

The elder Miss Barrington began at once to try to civilize Nan, and the result was not very satisfactory.

CHAPTER VII.
CIVILIZING GYPSY NAN

The first day that Nan was strong enough to sit up Miss Barrington entered the room, followed by a maid, who was carrying a large box. The gypsy girl was seated by one of the windows, wrapped in a woolly blue robe that belonged to Miss Dahlia.

"Anne!" the cold voice was saying, "that is the name I have decided to call you. Nan is altogether too frivolous for a Christian girl, and that is what I expect you to become. In order that you may cease to look like a heathen as soon as possible, I have had your gypsy toggery stored in the attic and I have purchased for you dresses that are quiet and ladylike."

Then turning to the maid, she said: "Marie, you may open the box and spread the contents on the bed."

There were two dresses. One was a dark brown wool, made in the plainest fashion, and the other was a dull blue.

Nan's eyes flashed. "I won't wear those ugly things!" she cried. "You have no right to take my own beautiful dress from me." Miss Barrington drew her self up haughtily as she replied coldly, —

"You will wear the dresses that I provide, or you will remain in your room. It is my duty, I assure you, not my pleasure, to try to change your heathen ways."

So saying Miss Barrington departed.

As soon as they were alone Miss Dahlia went over to the side of Nan's chair, and smoothing the dark hair with a loving hand, she said, pleadingly: "Dearie, wear them just for a time. My sister will soon be going to the city and you shall have something pretty."

Then, since the girl's eyes were still rebellious, the little lady opened a drawer and taking out a box she gave it to Nan.

"Those ribbons and trinklets belonged to Cherise. She would be glad to have you wear them."

The box contained many hair ribbons, some of soft hues and others of warm, glowing colors. Too, there was a slender gold chain with a lovely locket of pearls forming a flower.

"Oh, how pretty, pretty!" the gypsy girl murmured, and then instinctively wanting to say thank you, and not knowing how, she kissed the wrinkled cheek of the dear old lady.

That was the beginning of happy times for these two. When Nan was able to be out in the garden, she had her first reading lesson, and how pleased she was when at last she could read a simple fairy tale quite by herself from the beginning to the end.

The elder Miss Barrington, who was interested in culture clubs, was luckily away much of the time, but one day something happened which made that proud lady deeply regret that she had tried to civilize a heathen gypsy.

It was Sunday and the two ladies were ready to start for church. Nan was to have accompanied them. A neat tailored suit had been provided for her Sunday wear, a pair of kid gloves and a blue sailor hat. That morning when the gypsy girl went up to her room, she found a maid there who informed her that she was to dress at once as the ladies would start for St. Martin's-by-the-sea in half an hour.

When she was alone, Nan put on the garment that was so strange to her and the queer stiff hat. She stood looking in the long mirror and her eyes flashed. She would not wear that ugly head dress. She was not a gorigo and she would not dress like one. She heard someone ascending the stairs, and, believing it to be Miss Barrington coming to command that she go to church with them, Nan darted out into the corridor and opening the first door that she came to, she entered a dark hall where she had never been before. A flight of wooden stairs was there and ever so quietly she stole up, and, opening another door at the top, she entered the attic. Then she stood still and listened. She heard faint voices far below. Evidently Miss Barrington was looking for her. Nan glanced about to see where

she would hide if anyone came up the stairs but no one did, and soon she heard an automobile going down the drive.

Darting to a small window, to her relief, she saw that both ladies were on their way to church. Then suddenly she remembered something! She had given her word to dear Miss Dahlia that she would attend the morning service and she had never before broken a promise, but she could not, she would not wear that ugly suit and that stiff round hat. As she turned from the window, a flash of color caught her eye. There was an old trunk near and a bit of scarlet protruded from beneath the cover. With a cry of joy, Nan leaped to the spot and lifted the lid. Just as she had hoped, it was her own beautiful dress.

Gathering it lovingly in her arms, she started down the attic stairs, tiptoeing quietly lest she attract the attention of a maid.

Once in her room, she locked the door and joyously dressed in the old way, a yellow silk handkerchief wound about her flowing dark hair, and the gorgeous crimson and gold shawl draped about her shoulders.

No one saw the gypsy girl as she stole from the back door and into the garden-all-aglow. She picked a big, curly-yellow crysanthemum (for Miss Dahlia had told her to gather them whenever she wished) and she fastened it in the shawl. Then mounting her pony, she galloped down the highway. She was going to attend the morning services at the little stone church, St. Martin's-by-the-sea.

At the solemn moment when all heads were bowed in prayer, Nan reached the picturesque, ivy covered stone church and stood gazing wonderingly in at the open door.

Never before had this child of nature been in the portal of a church, and she felt strangely awed by the silence and wondered why the people knelt and were so still. Nan had never heard of prayer to an unseen God.

Her first impulse was to steal out again and gallop away up the mountain road where birds were singing, the sun glowing on red pepper berries, and everything was joyous. The gypsy girl could understand Nature's way of giving praise to its creator, but she had promised Miss Dahlia that she would attend the morning service, and so she would stay. Gazing over the bowed heads with joy she recognized one of them. Her beloved Miss Dahlia and the dreaded Miss Ursula occupied the Barrington pew, which was near the chancel.

Tiptoeing down the aisle, she reached the pew just as the congregation rose to respond to a chanted prayer. Unfortunately Miss Ursula sat on the outside, and there was not room for Nan. She stood still and gazed about helplessly. A small boy in front of Miss Barrington had turned, and seeing Nan, he tugged on his mother's sleeve and whispered: "Look, Mummie, here's a real gypsy in our church." Miss Ursula turned also, and when she beheld Nan in that "heathen costume," her face became a deep scarlet, and the expression in her eyes was not one that should have been inspired by her recent devotions.

"Go home at once." she said, in a low voice, "and remain in your room until I return."

Nan left the church. She was glad, glad to be once more out in the sunshine. She did not want to know the God of the gorigo if He dwelt in that dreary, sunless place.

As she galloped down the coast highway, how she wished that she might ride up into the mountains and never return.

Then she thought of Miss Dahlia. Just for a fleeting moment she had caught that dear little lady's glance when Miss Barrington was dismissing her, and Nan was almost sure that Miss Dahlia's sweet grey eyes had twinkled.

"I will only have to stay until the gold blossoms fade," the girl thought a little later, as she wandered about the garden paths peering into the curly yellow crysanthemums, wondering how much longer they would last. With a sigh, Nan went indoors and up to her room.

Undressing, she placed the gown that she so loved in a bureau drawer, and then, to please Miss Dahlia she put on the simple blue cashmere and sat with folded hands waiting to hear in what manner she was to be punished.

CHAPTER VIII.
NAN'S PUNISHMENT

Half an hour later Nan heard the automobile returning and she sighed resignedly. The gypsy girl's heart was rebellious, yet she would bear with it a little longer for Miss Dahlia's sake.

The door was opening, but Nan, with folded hands still gazed out of the window. A severe voice spoke:

"Anne, when I enter the room, I wish you to rise."

"Yes, lady," was the listless reply as the girl arose.

"And one thing more. I do not wish you to call me 'lady' in that gypsy fashion. If you wish to say Lady Ursula, you may do so. My English ancestry entitles me to that name."

Miss Barrington and Miss Dahlia then seated themselves, but Nan remained standing.

"Why don't you sit down?" the former asked impatiently.

"Sister," a gentle voice interceded, "Nan can't know our parlor manners, when she has been brought up in the big out-of-doors."

"She will soon have the opportunity to learn them, however," Miss Barrington said coldly, "for I have decided, since this morning's performance, to place Anne in a convent school. I find the task of Christianizing and civilizing a heathen more than I care to undertake."

"Oh, Sister Ursula, don't send Nan away," the other little lady implored. "Let me teach her. I will do so gladly."

"You!" The tone was scornful. "Do you suppose that you can succeed where I fail? No indeed, Anne shall tomorrow depart for a convent school which is connected with our church."

Then rising, she added: "We will now descend to the dining room and we will consider the subject closed."

Had the proud Miss Barrington glanced at the girl who was keeping so still, she might have seen a gleam in the dark eyes which showed that her spirit was not yet broken.

As they went down the wide stairway, Miss Dahlia slipped her hand over the brown one that hung listlessly at the girl's side. Nan understood that it was an assurance of the little lady's love, and her heart responded with sudden warmth.

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All that afternoon Nan sat in a sheltered corner of the garden with a beautiful story that she was trying to read, but her thoughts were continually planning and plotting. She could not and would not be sent to a convent school. She was only staying to keep her promise to Miss Dahlia, but now that Miss Ursula was sending her away, she was freed from that promise.

Just then a maid appeared, saying: "Miss Barrington wishes to see you in the library at once. She's got a telegram from somewhere and she's all upset about it."

When Nan entered the stately library, she saw Miss Barrington standing near Miss Dahlia's chair, and the younger woman was saying: "But, Sister Ursula, it would be of no use for me to go. I know nothing of law and of things like that."

"I am quite aware of the fact," the older woman said, "and I had no intention whatever of requesting you to go, but it is most inconvenient for me to spend several months in the East just at this time. I am president of the Society for Civic Improvements, and an active and influential member in many other clubs, as you know." Then, noting that Nan had entered the room, she turned toward her as she said coldly: "Anne, I shall be obliged to leave for New York on the early morning train. A wealthy aunt has passed away, leaving a large fortune to my sister and myself, but unfortunately, the

will is to be contested, which necessitates the presence of an heir who has some knowledge of legal matters. I may be away for several months, and so I will have to leave you in my sister's care, trusting that she will see the advisability of sending you to a convent school as soon as a suitable wardrobe can be prepared. That is all! You may now retire."

It had been hard for Nan to quietly listen to this glorious and astounding news. She did glance for one second at Miss Dahlia, and she was sure that she saw a happy light in those sweet grey eyes.

The next morning the household was astir at a very early hour, and at nine o'clock the automobile returned from the station and Miss Dahlia was in it alone.

Nan joyously ran across the lawn and caught the outstretched hands of the little lady.

"Oh, Miss Dahlia," the girl implored, "you aren't going to send me to a convent, are you? Because, if you do, I am going to run away."

"No, indeed, dearie," Miss Dahlia replied, as she sat on a marble bench near the fountain, and drew the girl down beside her.

Then she laughed as Nan had never heard her laugh before. There was real joy in it. "Dearie," she said, "I begged my sister to permit me to do what I could to try to civilize you while she is away, and, because her mind was so much occupied with other and weightier matters, she gave her consent, but she made me promise that you would attend service with me wearing proper clothes, and that I would teach you to sew and also lady-like manners."

"Oh, Miss Dahlia, I, will civilize fast enough for you, because I love you," the girl said, impulsively, as she pressed a wrinkled hand to her flush brown cheek.

"And I love you, Nan, you don't know how dearly, and you needn't civilize too much, if you don't want to. I love you just as you are. I am going to engage masters to come and teach you piano, singing and the harp or violin as you prefer."

The girl's dark eyes glowed happily as she exclaimed, "Oh, Miss Dahlia, how I love music; everything, every-where that sings; the brook, the bird, the wind in the trees! How glad I will be to learn to make music as they do."

Two wonderful weeks passed. A little French lady came to teach Nan languages, for which she had a remarkable aptitude, and when she began to sing as sweetly and naturally as the wood birds, Miss Dahlia was indeed delighted, and in the long evenings she taught the gypsy girl the songs that she used to sing. Too, there had been a shopping expedition to the village, and Nan had chosen a soft cashmere dress, the color of ripe cherries with the sun shining on them. At the beginning of the third week something happened which was destined to do much toward civilizing Nan.

CHAPTER IX.
THE LAD NEXT DOOR

It was Saturday and lessons were over for the week. Of tutors and music masters there would be none all that glorious day. Miss Dahlia had awakened with a headache. Nan slipped into the darkened room and asked tenderly if there was something that she could do to help.

“No, dearie,” the little lady replied, “I will just rest awhile. Go for a ride on Binnie if you wish. I will try to be down so that you need not have luncheon alone.”

A few moments later the girl emerged from a vine-hung side entrance and stood looking about. She wore her cherry red dress and the yellow silk handkerchief, with its dangles, was about her head.

In her hand she held a book, “Ivanhoe.” Miss Dahlia had been reading it aloud the night before, and the gypsy girl was eager to continue the story.

She would find a sheltered spot, she thought, and try to read it, although, as she well knew, many of the words were long and hard.

The Barrington estate contained several acres. Nan had never crossed to the high hedge that bounded it on the farther side from town.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.