

How to play eight of them

Everything below is drawn from Gomme's own descriptions; where she leaves something unstated it says so. Keep this beside the tunes sheet.

These are games, and they are playable this afternoon by anybody with six children or six adults willing to be children for ten minutes. What follows is drawn entirely from Gomme's descriptions; where she leaves something unstated it says so.

Three shapes cover almost everything in the volume. **A ring**, with one child in the middle who is chosen, buried, married or rescued. **Two lines** facing each other, advancing and retreating as they sing, which is the shape of a bargain or a fight. **An arch**, made by two children with their hands joined, through which the rest file until the arch comes down and catches one.

Nuts in May

two lines

Players. Any even number, in two lines facing each other, hands joined, a few paces apart.

How it goes. The first line advances and retires singing "Here we come gathering nuts in May"; the second answers "Whom will you have for nuts in May?"; the first names a child from the other side. The second line then asks "Who will you send to fetch her away?" and the first names one of its own.

The catch. The two named children come out and pull against each other across a line drawn between the sides. Whoever is pulled over joins the other side, and the game begins again.

Ending. When one side has everybody.

Hark the Robbers

an arch

Players. Two make an arch with their joined hands raised; the rest file through in a line, each holding the one in front.

How it goes. The two sing the accusation — the robbers are coming through, they have stolen a watch — and the line sings back, verse for verse, denying it and then defying them: what have we done to you? What will you take to set us free?

The catch. At the end of the singing the arch comes down on whoever is under it, and the prisoner is asked to choose between two things named secretly beforehand, and goes to stand behind whichever of the two chose it.

Ending. When everyone is caught, the two sides pull, and the side that pulls the other over has won.

Green Gravel

a ring

Players. Any number, in a ring, holding hands and walking round.

How it goes. They sing the verse; at the name in the last line — "Dear Annie, dear Annie, your true love is dead" — the child named turns round and goes on dancing with her back to the middle.

Ending. The game goes on until every child has been named and the whole ring is facing outwards. In some versions they are then turned back one at a time.

Note. This is the game Gomme reads as a funeral. Played, it is a counting-out that ends with everyone inside out, and children find it funny.

Jenny Jones

a ring and a bed

Players. Six or more. One is Jenny Jones and lies down; one is her mother; the rest are a line of visitors.

How it goes. The visitors come singing to ask for Jenny Jones to come out and play. The mother answers, verse by verse, that Jenny is washing, is starching, is ironing, is ill, is worse, is dead. Each answer is sung to the same tune.

The end. The visitors ask what she shall be buried in and argue about the colour — white for the angels, red for the soldiers, blue for the sailors — until one is agreed. Then Jenny gets up and chases them.

Note. Gomme prints more versions of this than of anything else in the volume. The chase at the end is the part every version keeps.

The Mulberry Bush

a ring

Players. Any number, in a ring.

How it goes. “Here we go round the mulberry bush” danced round; then a verse for each thing that is done — this is the way we wash our clothes, iron our clothes, go to school, come home from school — with everyone acting it in the middle of the ring while they sing.

Ending. When the actions run out, which is when the children run out of ideas.

Note. The oldest game in this book to still be played word for word in nurseries.

Milking Pails

two lines

Players. Two lines, or a mother and a line of daughters.

How it goes. A dialogue sung between the two sides: the daughters ask for a pair of milking pails, the mother answers that there is no money; they propose to sell the father’s feather bed, and are asked where he shall sleep; a bed is found for him in each verse, each more ridiculous, until the answers run out.

Ending. With the last unanswerable question.

Note. A pure argument-game. No chasing, no catching, and the pleasure is entirely in the escalation.

London Bridge

an arch

Players. Two make the arch and the rest file through, as in Hark the Robbers.

How it goes. Verse by verse the bridge is built of a material that fails — wood and clay wash away, bricks and mortar will not stay — until one is found that will hold. Then a prisoner is taken at the fall of the arch.

Ending. Gomme is explicit that this one does *not* end in a pull: it is “now generally played like ‘Oranges and Lemons,’ only there is no ‘tug-of-war’ at the end.” The prisoners are simply taken, one by one, until there is nobody left to go through.

Note. The verse about setting a man to watch all night is what Gomme reads as a memory of a sacrifice built into the bridge. The children are playing at building.

The Jolly Miller

a ring of pairs

Players. An odd number. All but one form pairs and walk round in a ring; the odd one is the miller and stands in the middle.

How it goes. They sing the verse; at the word “grab” everyone changes partners, and the miller grabs one in the confusion.

Ending. Whoever is left over is the miller, and it starts again.

Note. Musical chairs without the chairs, and older than the chairs.