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THE EVOLUTION of NICHOLAS

By Netta M. Breakenridge



HIS FULL name was Nicholas D'anfrio, and he was a veritable black-eyed, black-browed son of Italy. A glance at the swarthy little face would interest any child-lover in him, and I was very enthusiastic about my work and my children. When I went into Y-Street kindergarten they told me nothing at all about Nicholas. It was one of the jokes on a new teacher to let her discover him. And it never took very long.

The first morning as we sat all together on the big circle I looked around at the little faces and wondered about the natures behind. Could I make them love me? I would love them; I could not help it. And I meant to win their hearts if I could. Nicholas, with some others, was a left-over from the previous term, so I said to him, "Can you remember any song that you knew how to sing before school closed?" He raised his black eyes to my face and glared, simply glared at me. A little wonderingly I repeated my question in as simple English as the language affords, but with no better result.

"He no speka to you," said John Vileno, grinning like the little monkey that he was.

"He will when we get better acquainted," I said, turning to some others of the children for the suggestion of a song. When we went to the tables I placed in front of Nicholas, as well as the rest, a box of the pretty, bright-colored beads, but to my astonishment he gave the box a vicious shove, which scattered its rainbow-hued contents. When we marched out to the circle for games, I thought, "Now he will be interested surely." We clapped, and skipped, and tossed the ball, and Nicholas stood with the children, but that was all that could be said of him. Not a muscle of the little sullen face relaxed. Not an attempt did he make to enter into any of the games. And his attitude continued throughout the morning and for many another.

At first I tried in every way to break through the barrier, though I could not understand what it was, but vainly. September passed—we had been in school nearly a month. I had not heard the voice of Nicholas, or Nick, the "Old Nick," as "the girls," my associate teachers, called him. He was having no material to work or play with, as he had repulsed every attempt to include him in its distribution. Finally, almost despairing, I casually set a little box of blocks before him one morning, passing quickly to the next child. In an instant the box spun across the table and down on the floor with a clack that startled us all. And Nicholas slid down in his chair until his head rested on the back, and there he stayed, immovable, while the others built trolleys, or boats, or bridges, each pair of little hands following the sweet will of their diminutive owner. At length I determined to ignore him completely, and I proceeded to do so, apparently never seeing the dark, little, scowling face, though I was keenly conscious all the time of its presence. The child utterly baffled me. At a gentle touch of the hand, such as another child would respond to instantly, he had flung himself away from me with a savage little snarl. So I ceased to call his name with the rest, or to notice his presence in any way.

At this juncture came the first fire drill. The little ones had been carefully instructed. Three quick strokes

of the gong we would make believe was the signal for "Miss Corning's game." Miss Corning was the principal, and this game was popularly supposed to be her chief form of amusement. One morning it came. We stood on the game circle; nothing could be better. The children flew to the places assigned to them and started off, all but Nicholas. He sat himself down in the middle of the floor, wearing on his face the pleasantest expression I had yet seen there. What should I do? I knew it was only a drill, but suppose, some day, there should be a fire? Plainly I could not leave him there. I ran over to him and picking him up, my hands under his two arms, I half dragged, half carried him down the long stairs, his stout little boots bumping thunderously on every step.

I was greeted with roars of laughter from "the girls" when I made my appearance in the yard. I set my little charge down, only to have him tear away from me, and rush madly into the building and up the stairs. When we returned to our various class-rooms, there sat Nick in the middle of the kindergarten floor, the identical spot from which I had rescued him. What should I do with the child? He was sullen, troublesome, and absolutely irresponsible to every sort of approach. The Thanksgiving season drew near and the children delighted in the songs, stories, and games which came with the happy time—all except Nick.

After a few days' holiday, that last week in November, we came together again to take up the Christmas work. The dainty little things we were making were a delight to me as well as to the children. We were an army of little Santa Clauses and this was our workshop. Great things were planned—surprises for fathers and mothers, for Miss Corning, and for the other teachers—and what a whispering and laughing and scurrying there was if any of these prospective recipients of our bounty should come into the room. Eyes grew bright, cheeks rosy, as we sang merrily, "Old Santa Claus puts on his cap And buckles it under his chin; He laughs and sings as he fills his sack

And straps it over his sturdy back,
He'll get all he can within—
For girls and boys
Such pretty toys.
Tra-la-la-la-la!
La-la-la!
With dolls and drums and sugar plums
Tra-la-la-la-la!
La-la-la!
For all little girls and boys."

And then how the shrill little voices would soften as we sang, tenderly,

"Oh, little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie."

Very quiet they would grow, very thoughtful the childish little faces become, as they thought of the fair Child whose story they were learning so to love.

One morning, ten days or so, it was, before Christmas, I had told again the story of the Child and then we sang,

"Ring, oh, bells of Christmas ring;
Sing, oh, happy children sing;
Far away beneath the starlight
Was the birthplace of a King.
In a stable, in a manger,
Lay this princely little Stranger;
'Twas the blessed Christ Child,
'Twas the blessed Christ Child,
Oh, bells of Christmas, ring."

I looked around the quiet circle, and lo! did my eyes deceive me? or was there really, really a tender little smile upon the face of Nicholas D'anfrio? Yes, yes; and a far-away, soft little look in those black, black eyes. I looked away quickly, lest he should see me watching him, and the tears rose to my own eyes. Here was a sign, and I had waited, oh, so long!

At games, I glanced furtively toward Nicholas. The sullen little lips had re-

laxed and were dark little hands clap, to the moment Miss room. Usually pleasant word to pass on through around the circle in my me in amazement take no notice the song, but sated with me better things. I could take in this strange, no companions the silver weaving-do, I hesitated solved the problem," he said. had heard his stooped over I weave in the s me for a mor from my hand To my surprise as quickly as children who

before the s from his lips phrase, "Me English cry

I could ha and kissed th but I knew close of the the circle to shake each o Nicholas was hard little fi ment in my was full.

Late that way home, s the clear, gl the little room my heart wa glad thanks