



A Soldier of the Flag

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"NOW, children, how many of you would like to serve the flag?" Thirty-nine eager hands went up in answer to Miss May's appeal. Nicolo did not respond. His thoughts were still intent on the story he had just heard.

"How can little children serve the flag?" Miss May went on. "Gretchen, what can you do?"

"I minds my ma, like der soldier." Gretchen's tone was exceedingly virtuous. As she resumed her seat she glanced disapprovingly at Pete, who did not mind his "ma."



"We can all serve the flag by telling the truth." This was Percy's contribution. Percy with his curls, his starched ruffles, and eloquent speech, was out of place among the little aliens of the first grade of the Lincoln school. Neither was he a favorite among the children. Black eyed Yetta cast a disdainful look at Percy. She did not think much of his speech, but was fairly bursting to add her mite of information. "Teacher lady, when I sees things what I want much, I never takes 'em 'til I gets permission." Yetta sat down triumphant. Miss May's eyes sought Nicolo's corner. "Nicolo, what are you going to do for the flag?" Nicolo came back with a start. He had been far away from the sunny schoolroom. Mounted on a great charger, with sword and shield in hand, he had led a host to victory against a savage horde. He was returning victorious to receive the cheers and plaudits of an admiring populace. Miss May's question rudely interrupted the dream of glory.

Nicolo looked frightened. What did "teacher" want? Involuntarily his grimy little hand sought his pocket and closed over an eraser. His eyes furtively sought Miss May's. No, the grieved look was not there. She did not suspect him this time, at least not yet. What could she want? Miss May repeated her question. Was that all she wanted? Yes, of course, he knew what he would do for the flag. The words fairly tripped over each other in their eagerness to come forth.

"I lika to be a soldier. I lika carry the flag in battles, and rida da horse, and carry da sword lika da knight. I be brave soldier." Unconsciously he straightened up and threw back his head as if to challenge the world. Miss May smiled, then sighed.

"I hope you will, Nicolo, but you must do as Miss May tells you now. You may take your papers and pencils, children, and draw the flag."

Papers rustled joyously. This was what they liked, but scarcely had the children settled down to work when Rose burst into tears.

"Miss May, my new red and white eraser is gone." All eyes turned on Nicolo, who was busy with his drawing.

"Did you take Rose's eraser, Nicolo?" Miss May's

voice showed exasperation, two red spots appeared on her cheeks.

"No, ma'am." The answer was prompt and assured. Nicolo went on with his drawing.

"Turn out your pockets." Nicolo gasped. He had not expected this. There was nothing to do but obey. "Teacher lady's" eyes looked sorry as she handed the eraser to Rose.

"Nicolo, you can never serve the flag until you learn not to steal. You may sit in that little chair in the corner until you can tell me that you are sorry."

Nicolo sat down. He knew that he was barred out of the morning pleasures. He might not look to see how much his seeds had grown. It was his turn to water the plants, but now some one else would do it. Worst of all, teacher had said he could never serve the flag because he was a thief. The black eyes dimmed for an instant. Then he sprang up with a sudden resolution. He would never steal again. Perhaps he might then serve the flag. He ran to Miss May's side.

"I am sorry, Miss May. I never taka da rubber from Rose no more." The eager eyes looked trustfully into Miss May's, and Nicolo was pardoned.

The sharp clang of the fire gong sent the children out of their seats in a hurry. It was Nicolo's duty to lead the line. At the first tap of the drum they marched out. Nicolo walked proudly, keeping careful step. He liked fire drills. He hoped Miss May was seeing how well he did it. The children turned, awaiting the signal to re-enter. But this was not a drill, it was a real fire. Little puffs of smoke and tongues of flame burst from the basement windows. The fire engine came clanging down the street. The children watched it, fascinated. Suddenly Nicolo darted from the group. Every one was so intent on watching the burning building that he slipped around the corner of the schoolhouse unseen.

With winged feet Nicolo sped to the side door. No one was there to stop him. He dashed into the building and raced down the long corridor. It was filled with smoke. He choked and gasped, and then dashed headlong into the first grade room. The flag, he must save it; but it was far beyond his reach. He sprang upon a