

CHARLES by Shirley Jackson

The day my son Laurie started kindergarten, he gave up his little-boy clothes. He started wearing blue jeans with a belt. I watched him go off that first morning with the older girl next door. He looked as though he were going off to a fight.

He came home the same way at lunchtime. "Isn't anybody here?" he yelled. At the table, he knocked over his little sister's milk.

"How was school today?" I asked. "Did you learn anything?"

"I didn't learn nothing," he said.

"*Anything*," I said. "Didn't learn *anything*."

"But the teacher spanked a boy," Laurie said. "For being fresh."

"What did he do?" I asked. "Who was it?"

Laurie thought. "It was Charles," he said. "The teacher spanked him and made him stand in the corner. He was really fresh."

"What did he do?" I asked. But Laurie slid off his chair, took a cookie, and left.

The next day, Laurie sat down for lunch. "Well," he said, "Charles was bad again today." He grinned. "Today Charles hit the teacher," he said.

"Good heavens," I said. "I suppose he got spanked again?"

"He sure did," Laurie said.

"Why did Charles hit the teacher?" I asked.

"Because she tried to make him color with red crayons. Charles wanted to color with green crayons. So he hit the teacher. She spanked him and said nobody play with Charles. But everybody did."

The third day, Charles bounced a see-saw onto the head of a little girl. He made her bleed. The teacher made him stay inside during recess.

On Thursday, Charles had to stand in a corner. He was pounding his feet on the floor during story-time. Friday, Charles could not use the blackboard because he threw chalk.

On Saturday, I talked to my husband about it. "Do you think kindergarten is too disturbing for Laurie?" I asked him. "This Charles boy sounds like a bad influence."

"It will be all right," my husband said, "There are bound to be people like Charles in the world. He might as well meet them now as later."

On Monday, Laurie came home late.

"Charles!" he shouted, as he ran up to the house. "Charles was bad again!"

I let him in and helped him take off his coat. "You know what Charles did?" he said. "Charles yelled so much that the teacher came in from first grade. She said our teacher had to keep Charles quiet. And so Charles had to stay after school. And so all the children stayed to watch him."

"What did he do?" I asked.

"He just sat there," Laurie said, noticing his father. "Hi Pop, you old dust mop."

"What does this Charles look like? My husband asked. "What's his last name?"

"He's bigger than me," Laurie said. "And he doesn't wear a jacket."

I could hardly wait for the first Parent-Teachers meeting. I wanted very much to meet Charles' mother. The meeting was still a week away.

On Tuesday, Laurie said, "Our teacher had a friend come to see her in school today."

My husband and I said together, "Was it Charles' mother?"

"Naaah," Laurie said. "Charles was fresh to the teacher's friend. They wouldn't let him do exercises."

"Fresh again?" I said.

"He kicked the teacher's friend," Laurie said. "The teacher's friend told Charles to touch his toes. And Charles kicked him."

"What do you think they'll do about Charles?" my husband asked.

"I don't know," Laurie said. "Throw him out of school, I guess."

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Wednesday and Thursday were routine. Charles yelled during story-time. He hit a boy in the stomach and made him cry. On Friday, Charles stayed after school again. All the other children stayed to watch him.

On Monday of the third week, Laurie came home with another report. “You know what Charles did today?” he asked. “He told a girl to say a word, and she said it. The teacher washed her mouth out with soap, and Charles laughed.”

“What word?” his father asked.

“It’s so bad, I’ll have to whisper it to you,” Laurie said. He whispered into my husband’s ear.

“Charles told the little girl to say *that*?” he said, his eyes widening.

“She said it *twice*,” Laurie said. “Charles told her to say it *twice*.”

“What happened to Charles?” my husband asked.

“Nothing,” Laurie said. “He was passing out the crayons.”

The next day, Charles said the evil word himself three or four times. He got his mouth washed out with soap each time. He also threw chalk.

My husband came to the door that night as I was leaving for the Parent-Teachers meeting. “Invite her over after the meeting,” he said. “I want to get a look at the mother of that kid.”

“I hope she’s there,” I said.

“She’ll be there,” my husband said. “How could they hold a Parent-Teachers meeting without Charles’ mother?”

At the meeting, I looked over the faces of all the other mothers. None of them looked unhappy enough to be the mother of Charles. No one stood up and apologized for the way her son had been acting. No one mentioned Charles.

After the meeting, I found Laurie’s teacher. “I’ve been wanting to meet you,” I said. “I’m Laurie’s mother.”

Oh, yes,” she said. “We’re all so interested in Laurie.”

“He certainly likes kindergarten,” I said. “He talks about it all the time.”

“He’s had some trouble getting used to school,” she said. “But I think he’ll be all right.”

“Laurie usually fits in quickly,” I said. “I suppose his trouble might be from Charles’ influence.”

“Charles?” the teacher said.

“Yes,” I said, laughing. “You must have your hands full with Charles.”

“Charles?” she said. “We don’t have any Charles in kindergarten.”

