

Charles

The day my son Laurie started morning kindergarten, he came home for lunch and spoke insolently to his father.

"How was school today?" I asked, elaborately casual.

"All right," he said.

"Did you learn anything?" his father asked.

Laurie regarded his father coldly. "I didn't learn nothing," he said.

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

"The teacher spanked a boy, though," Laurie said, addressing his bread and butter. "For being fresh," he added, with his mouth full.

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

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

"What did he do?" I asked again, but Laurie slid off his chair, took a cookie, and left, while his father was still saying, "See here, young man."

The next day Laurie remarked at lunch, as soon as he sat down,

"Well, Charles was bad again today." He grinned enormously and said, "Today Charles hit the teacher."

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

"He sure did," Laurie said. "Look up," he said to his father.

"What?" his father said, looking up.

"Look down," Laurie said. "Look at my thumb. Gee, you're dumb." He began to laugh insanelly.

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

"Because she tried to make him color with red crayons," Laurie said. "Charles wanted to color with green crayons so he hit the teacher and she spanked him and said nobody play with Charles but everybody did."

The third day, Charles bounced a see-saw on to the head of a little girl and made her bleed, and the teacher made him stay inside all during recess. Thursday Charles had to stand in a corner during storytime because he kept pounding his feet on the floor. Friday Charles was deprived of blackboard privileges because he threw chalk.

On Saturday I remarked to my husband, "Do you think kindergar-

ten is too unsettling for Laurie? All this toughness, and bad grammar, and this Charles boy sounds like such a bad influence."

"It'll be all right," my husband said reassuringly. "Bound to be people like Charles in the world. Might as well meet them now."

On Monday Laurie came home late, full of news. "Charles," he shouted as he came up the hill; I was waiting anxiously on the front steps. "Charles," Laurie yelled all the way up the hill, "Charles was bad again."

"Come right in," I said, as soon as he came close enough. "Lunch is waiting."

"You know what Charles did?" he demanded, following me through the door. "Charles yelled so in school, 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, climbing into his chair at the table. "Hi, Pop, y'old dust mop."

"Charles had to stay after school today," I told my husband. "Everyone stayed with him."

"What does this Charles look like?" my husband asked Laurie.

"What's his other name?"

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

Monday night was the first Parent-Teachers meeting, and only the fact that the baby had a cold kept me from going; I wanted passionately to meet Charles's mother. On Tuesday Laurie remarked suddenly, "Our teacher had a friend come to see her in school today."

"Charles's mother?" my husband and I asked simultaneously.

"Naaah," Laurie said scornfully. "It was a man who came and made us do exercises, we had to touch our toes. Look." He climbed down from his chair and squatted down and touched his toes. "Like this," he said. He got solemnly back into his chair and said, picking up his fork, "Charles didn't even do exercises."

"That's fine," I said heartily. "Didn't Charles want to do exercises?"

"Naaah," Laurie said. "Charles was so fresh to the teacher's friend he wasn't allowed to do exercises."

"Fresh again?" I said.

"He kicked the teacher's friend,"

Laurie said. "The teacher's friend told Charles to touch his toes like I just did and Charles kicked him."

"What are they going to do about Charles, do you suppose?" Laurie's father asked him.

Laurie shrugged elaborately. "Throw him out of school, I guess," he said.

Wednesday and Thursday were routine; Charles yelled during story hour and hit a boy in the stomach and made him cry. On Friday Charles stayed after school again and so did all the other children.

During the third and fourth weeks it looked like a reformation in Charles; Laurie reported grimly at lunch on Thursday of the third week, "Charles was so good today the teacher gave him an apple."

"What?" I said, and my husband added warily, "You mean Charles?"

"Charles," Laurie said. "He gave the crayons around and he picked up the books afterward and the teacher said he was her helper."

"What happened?" I asked incredulously.

"He was her helper, that's all," Laurie said, and shrugged.

"Can this be true, about Charles?" I asked my husband that

night. "Can something like this happen?"

"Wait and see," my husband said cynically. "When you've got a Charles to deal with, this may mean he's only plotting."

He seemed to be wrong. For over a week Charles was the teacher's helper; each day he handed things out and he picked things up; no one had to stay after school.

"The P.T.A. meeting's next week again," I told my husband one evening. "I'm going to find Charles's mother there."

"Ask her what happened to Charles," my husband said. "I'd like to know."

"I'd like to know myself," I said.

On Friday of that week things were back to normal. "You know what Charles did today?" Laurie demanded at the lunch table, in a voice slightly awed. "He told a little girl to say a word and she said it and the teacher washed her mouth out with soap and Charles laughed."

"What word?" his father asked unwisely, and Laurie said, "I'll have to whisper it to you, it's so bad." He got down off his chair and went around to his father. His father

bent his head down and Laurie whispered joyfully. His father's eyes widened.

"Did Charles tell the little girl to say that?" he asked respectfully.

"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."

Monday morning Charles abandoned the little girl and said the evil word himself three or four times, getting his mouth washed out with soap each time. He also threw chalk.

My husband came to the door with me that evening as I set out for the P.T.A. meeting. "Invite her over for a cup of tea after the meeting," he said. "I want to get a look at her."

"If only she's there," I said prayerfully.

"She'll be there," my husband said. "I don't see how they could hold a P.T.A. meeting without Charles's mother."

At the meeting I sat restlessly, scanning each comfortable matronly face, trying to determine which one hid the secret of Charles. None of them looked to me haggard enough. No one stood up in

the meeting and apologized for the way her son had been acting. No one mentioned Charles.

After the meeting I identified and sought out Laurie's kindergarten teacher. She had a plate with a cup of tea and a piece of chocolate cake; I had a plate with a cup of tea and a piece of marshmallow cake. We maneuvered up to one another cautiously, and smiled.

"I've been so anxious to meet you," I said. "I'm Laurie's mother."

"We're all so interested in Laurie," she said.

"Well, he certainly likes kindergarten," I said. "He talks about it all the time."

"We had a little trouble adjusting, the first week or so," she said primly, "but now he's a fine little helper. With occasional lapses, of course."

"Laurie usually adjusts very quickly," I said. "I suppose this time it's Charles's influence."

"Charles?"

"Yes," I said, laughing, "you must have your hands full in that kindergarten, with Charles."

"Charles?" she said. "We don't have any Charles in the kindergarten."

The Kids Table

James was exhausted. Twenty-two people, including seven kids under age six, were crowded into his family's house for Thanksgiving.

"Jimmy! Jimmy!" called a little voice.

Oh no! Three-year-old Cara had found James's hiding spot, behind the sofa in the basement.

They weren't playing hide-and-seek. James was just trying to catch his breath. All day, he'd been grabbed and thumped by little cousins who thought he was a climbing gym. Cara now leaped onto James. He stood up and shifted Cara onto his back. She squealed and held tightly to his neck as he trudged up the steps with her. James emerged in the kitchen where his mother, grandmother, an aunt, and two uncles were getting dinner ready.

"OK, time to let go. You're choking me," James gasped as he set Cara on the floor.

Suddenly, Mario, Dana, Kyle, Sean, Franny, and Lisa stormed into the kitchen, shouting. "I want a piggyback, too!" "No, it's my turn!"

James backed up against the refrigerator and shot a pleading look toward his mother.

"OK, kiddos," said Mom, taking the hint, "go wash your hands. It's almost time for dinner, and Jimmy needs to help me."

"Awww," whined the seven kids. Mom shooed them out. Aunt Brenda followed to make sure they found the bathroom.

"No rest for the main attraction, eh?" Mom ruffled James's hair. James ducked. He hated being treated like a little kid. He was almost as tall as his mom, after all. Mom handed him a stack of plastic plates. "Here, take these to the kids' table."

The kids' table. He'd forgotten that he would be eating with the babies, separate from the adults. He hoped the kids would be too hungry to bother him. As soon as he set down the last plate, the band of munchkins charged back into the room.

Fortunately, Aunt Brenda saved him. "No, it's not time to play with Jimmy! Find a chair and sit down."

James sighed and started, looking for an empty chair when his mom patted his shoulder. "Maybe you'd like to sit with the adults this year," she said. "I saved you a place next to Dad."

It was Thanksgiving, but to

James it suddenly felt like his birthday. The adults' table! No squealing, no soda spilled on his lap, no grubby fingers stealing his corn bread. James sat next to his father, too happy to speak.

As the adults passed around the steaming dishes, James looked over at the little kids. They were unusually quiet, just picking at their food. The conversation around James centered on electric bills, how to repair a roof, and what to do with leftovers. He took a piece of turkey and peeked back at the kids' table, just in time to see Sean steal Cara's juice.

"Hey!" She grabbed it back.

"I don't have anything to drink!" Sean wailed.

"That's enough juice!" Aunt Brenda scolded.

"Eat your turkey."

James' plate was full. He glanced at the kids, glad to be away from their silliness, and saw Sean poke Cara. Cara poked him back, and Sean started to cry. Before he realized what he was doing, James grabbed his plate, jumped up, and strode to the kids' table. "Hey!"

The children looked at James,

surprised and excited. "Did you hear about the giant squirrel that pounded on the door this morning?" James asked.

They stared at him, wide-eyed. "It was as big as a dog and demanded that we hand over Aunt Brenda's special walnut stuffing," James said.

"Did you give it to him?" asked Sean. All the kids hoped so. Aunt Brenda was wonderful, but her walnut stuffing? They wouldn't go near it.

"I almost got the pan to the door, but Aunt Brenda made me put it back," James said. He pulled over a chair and sat down.

"Awww," the children cried.

But one by one, they picked up their forks and began to eat. James continued, "I told him to come back later, that I was sure we'd have a lot left over."

"I can hear you, you know," called Aunt Brenda.

"We were just saying how the squirrel..." James pretended to explain, then clamped a hand over his mouth. He winked at the kids before continuing loudly, "I mean, we love your stuffing, Auntie Brenda."

The children giggled and ate. Some of them even tried the walnut stuffing. A few of them discovered that they liked it!