

CHARLES

by Shirley Jackson

The day my son Larry started kindergarten he refused to wear any little kid clothes and would only wear blue jeans with a belt; I watched him go off the first morning with the older girl next door, seeing clearly that an era of my life was ended, my sweet-voiced nursery-school tot replaced by a long-trousered, swaggering character who forgot to stop at the corner and wave good-bye to me.

He came running home the same way, the front door slamming open, his cap on the floor, and his voice suddenly shouting, "Isn't anybody here?"

At lunch he spoke insultingly to his father, spilled his baby sister's milk, and remarked that his teacher said we were not to curse at school.

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

"All right," he said.

"Did you learn anything?" his father asked.

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

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

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

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

Larry thought. "It was Charles," he said. "He was sassy. The teacher spanked him and made him stand in the corner. He was awfully sassy."

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

The next day Larry 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, mindful of my words, "I suppose he got spanked again?"

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

"What?" his father said, looking up.

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

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

"Because she tried to make him color with red crayons," Larry 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 anyway."

The third day—it was a Wednesday of the first week—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 story-time because he kept pounding his feet on the floor. Friday Charles was deprived of black-board privileges because he threw chalk.

On Saturday I remarked to my husband, "Do you think kindergarten is too unsettling for Larry? All this toughness and bad grammar, and this Charles boy sounds like such a bad influence."

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

On Monday Larry came home late, full of news. "Charles," he shouted as he came up the hill; I was waiting anxiously on the front steps. "Charles," Larry 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 they sent a boy in from first grade to tell the teacher she had to make Charles keep 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," Larry 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 Larry. "What's his other name?"

"He's bigger than me," Larry said. "And he doesn't have any boots and he doesn't 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 Larry remarked suddenly, "Our teacher had a friend come to see her in school today."

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

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

"Sassy again?" I said.

"He kicked the teacher's friend," Larry said. "The teacher's friend just 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?" Larry's father asked him.

Larry 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.

With the third week of kindergarten Charles was an institution in our family; the baby was being a Charles when she cried all afternoon; Larry did a Charles when he filled his wagon full of mud and pulled it through the kitchen; even my husband, when

he caught his elbow in the telephone cord and pulled the telephone and a bowl of flowers off the table, said, after the first minute, "Looks like Charles."

During the third and fourth weeks it looked like a reformation in Charles; Larry 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," Larry 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," Larry 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 PTA 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?" Larry 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 Larry 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 Larry whispered joyfully. His father's eyes widened.

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

"She said it *twice*," Larry said. "Charles told her to say it *twice*."

"What happened to Charles?" my husband asked.

"Nothing," Larry 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 PTA 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 PTA 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 exhausted 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 Larry'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 Larry's mother."

"We're all so interested in Larry," 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 helper. With occasional lapses, of course."

"Larry 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 kid named Charles in the kindergarten."