

A Teacher *for Calvin*

Sara Jean Yoder

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Author's Note

Many of the incidents in this story are based on actual happenings both in my classroom and in those of other teachers. Calvin was real—a lovable student in spite of his weaknesses and failings. May this story be an inspiration, and may God receive all glory and honor.

Chapter 1



Calvin

“Teacher, Calvin didn’t come today.”

“He didn’t?” Laura paused to look at Henry. She did not know him very well yet, but she knew already that he liked to be the first to tell her things. He had obviously hurried in order to tell her this bit of news. But why had he thought it so important to tell her Calvin would not be at school today? She was beginning to realize that children are often sharper than adults credit them to be and notice feelings adults think they have well-hidden. Had Henry sensed how she felt about Calvin?

She glanced out the window at the hills. The mists that had settled over the area the night before rose lazily as the sunshine warmed the hills and drove away the brisk coolness that had accompanied her to school this morning. The hills rose tall and mighty around the school, and Laura again mentally thanked the builder of the school. Had he known what comfort and strength a teacher would get with such a view always before her?

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She turned to Henry. Just looking at him warmed her heart. His red hair shone, and his freckles, sprinkled so generously over his face, were like so many friendly dots. He was good-natured. True, he ambled through his lessons in an easy, unconcerned way, and if she scolded him, his great blue eyes became dark and burdened. For perhaps half a day he would labor, as through great trials. During that time he worked doggedly at his lessons, employing his pencil with great long sighs that seemed to burst from his very heart, while he regarded her with mournful eyes. And she, feeling hard-hearted and cruel, maintained her outward decorum while being inwardly wrenched with pity.

“Thank you for telling me, Henry.” She knew Henry would be glad to visit, but at the moment, Calvin and her feelings as his teacher occupied her thoughts. She had known that teaching school would not be easy. Her mind wandered to her friends and her parents back home. They had been surprised at her decision to teach. Why should she stop a good job in town to teach a little country school? There had been some shaking of heads and dubious comments.

“You just aren’t cut out to be a teacher,” one of her friends had told her.

“But I like to work with children,” Laura protested.

Her friend had shaken her head. “I know. And that is important. But how will you ever make your own decisions? You know how unsure you are of yourself.”

“I know,” Laura agreed. “I’ve always depended so much on my parents.”

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“And you are an emotional person. You laugh and cry about the littlest things. How will you manage to keep calm?”

All this Laura knew. And for a time, she had been assailed with doubts. How could she teach if she did not have the qualities of a teacher? But she longed to be doing something worthwhile. The paycheck she received every week gave her little satisfaction. Her job in town was just that—a job. What was meaningful about that? When she had been asked to consider teaching, she knew this was it. This was what she wanted to do.

She had not realized what all teaching would involve. But she was determined to love the children and teach them and mete out punishments when the need arose. *If only*, she sighed to herself, *if only I always knew exactly what to do*. But school teaching had no written directions, and no dotted lines to follow. Laura had to make her own dotted lines. “Please, dear God,” she had prayed over and over, “help me do the right things. Make me wise.” She knew she was working with immortal souls. If she caused a little one to stumble—what then?

No, she had not expected it to be easy, and she certainly had not reckoned on Calvin. Bringing her mind back to the moment, she bowed her head at her desk. She felt ashamed and humbled because she knew she did not feel like a real teacher should when a child was absent. Instead of feeling sorry, a sense of relief had swept through her.

Without Calvin in school, the day would, in all probability, pass smoothly. She would not have to be on guard every

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minute. *It's strange how one pupil can affect the whole school, not to mention the teacher!* Laura sighed again. *If only I could miss Calvin.* But how could she miss her biggest problem, her chief troublemaker?

The next day Calvin was back. As usual, he bounded into the schoolhouse. His lunch box clattered onto the shelf, and he rushed in to get his mitt. It was to be a typical day with Calvin in it.

“Good morning, Calvin.”

For a moment Calvin regarded her with his dark eyes. Laura wondered what he was thinking, but there was no way to know. Most of the children's faces were as open as a book. They came to her desk and talked. But not Calvin. Inside, Calvin was a boy she did not know. How could she get Calvin to trust her—as a friend?

Now he murmured a greeting and hurried out. Laura returned to preparing the morning's lower-grade math lesson. If only Henry and Calvin were a little more alike!

A little later Susie, her dress smudged with dirt and tears threatening to spill from her eyes, came in. By her side, with her arm around her, was Dora, another of the first-grade girls. She murmured comforting words to Susie as they came up to Laura's desk, her little face full of concern for her comrade.

“What happened, girls?” Laura asked briskly. She must not show too much sympathy, or Susie would burst into tears.

“We were riding on the wagon and—” Susie gulped, determined not to cry, “—then Calvin gave us a great big

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push and we dumped out and I scratched my knee and my clean dress is dirty and my mom hoped I could wear this dress tomorrow too." Susie took a deep breath.

"I see. Well, your knee doesn't look too bad. I'll put something on it, and I think we can clean up the dress. Your mother is busy with the baby, isn't she?" Quickly Laura applied the antiseptic. "Dora, would you please tell Calvin to come in?" She felt impatient with Calvin. He knew better.

Calvin soon appeared at the door. Several children trailed behind him. Had they come as supporters for Calvin or only as onlookers?

"Go on out and play," she said, waving them out. They moved slowly, thoughtfully out the door with one or two looking back, as if expecting Calvin to receive some awful sentence.

Calvin wore his innocent look. In fact, he had something of an injured air. Laura walked to the window and looked out. None of the children filled her with exasperation or tried her patience like Calvin. But still, he had a way about him that made her want to laugh when she wanted to be stern.

"Calvin, why did you push the wagon so hard? You know the little girls cannot guide it around the curves like the older children." Sometimes she wished the little red wagon had never appeared at school. But the children loved it in spite of all the tumbles it caused.

"They wanted me to push them." Calvin stared into space.

If only he would act sorry! But there was no trace of remorse on Calvin's face. It seemed as though it did not

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matter to him what the teacher would say or do. It was this seeming indifference that baffled her.

“Calvin—” Laura paused. “I’m glad you take the time to push the children. They love rides, but you must remember not to push so hard. Why don’t you apologize to Susie? Tell her you didn’t mean to dump her out.”

“Okay.” Calvin nodded, acting as unconcerned as possible. He muttered an apology to Susie. Susie’s little face beamed with forgiveness.

“Oh, that’s all right, Calvin.” She smiled radiantly, her former woes forgotten. Calvin went sheepishly to his desk.

What else could I expect? Laura wondered as she went to ring the bell. If Calvin pushed the wagon, he was sure to push it with all his might. It was the same way when he played ball or any game. He played hard, and he played to win. He was the fastest runner in school, and when the children chose teams, Calvin was sure to be the first one chosen. And his side usually won. However, this made it more difficult for him to have good attitudes. On the rare times his team did not win, Calvin could hardly accept losing.

While Laura was taking roll call, she saw Calvin glancing slyly her way. Looking closer, she saw he had his math book and paper out, all ready for work as soon as devotions were over.

“Calvin, clear your desk.” Laura took a deep breath. She was neither stern enough nor strict enough—else why must she tell him again and again? It was like a tug-of-war

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between them, Calvin trying to do everything he could get by with. She watched as he put his books back into the desk.

They started to sing, but Calvin's mind was obviously not on singing. He had not combed his hair! Now he pulled out his comb and combed his black hair. He made little faces and grimaces whenever he encountered a snarl. Some of the smaller children forgot to sing. Fascinated, they watched him. Even with so small an audience, Calvin became quite dramatic. With a flourish and exaggerated motions, his expressions became even more frightful.

"Calvin, don't ever comb your hair during devotions." Laura paused. What could she say to impress or humble him? "Your mind was not on the song we sang, was it?" She glanced down at the hymn they had just finished singing. She realized with a start that *her* mind had not been on the song either. All she had been thinking of was Calvin. And this was not the first time: one morning he had tied his shoes; another morning he had carefully brushed his trousers. Why was it so hard for him to sit still and sing? Or sit still and do anything? It was not pleasant having to watch him so closely. It made her feel like a hawk, always ready to pounce down upon him.

She looked out the window. The hills rose calm and peaceful around them. The calm she had felt that morning was gone, and frustration welled up in its place. The day had hardly begun. How could she cope with Calvin through a whole school term?

After devotions were over, she started with classes. She had barely finished giving Calvin's class their math

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assignment until Calvin had his paper out. He worked at a tremendous rate, bending over his paper, furiously scratching away as if his lessons were some terrible beast he must demolish. Laura sighed. Calvin would be finished with his work before Henry had made much of a start. Even now, Henry was just fumbling about in his desk for a piece of paper. If only she could give a portion of Calvin's speed to Henry!

"Remember, Calvin, if your paper isn't neat, you will have to do it over."

Calvin paused. He glanced at Laura and then looked at his paper. He frowned a little. For a minute or two, he slowed down. Then he picked up speed again.

Laura went on to other classes. Halfway through a class Calvin slammed his books into his desk. His hand shot up, and he waved impatiently.

"Yes, Calvin," she said when she had finished with the class. She had heard experienced teachers say they did not answer questions when they were having classes, and she tried to practice it too. She knew what he would say even before he spoke.

"I don't have anything to do."

Laura glanced at the rest of Calvin's class. Henry sat gazing at Calvin thoughtfully. He had managed to do five problems himself. There was no envy on Henry's face. Henry was satisfied just as things were. He got out his little pencil sharpener—not that his pencil was broken, but a little sharpening would break the monotony.

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“Why don’t you get a library book, Calvin?” If only Calvin liked to read! Half-bored, he rose and went to the bookshelf. She knew if she didn’t give him something to do, he would get into mischief. But what else could she give him to do?

And so the day passed. It was in the last period of the day that Laura discovered Calvin had written bad words in his book. She stared at them, and a great weight settled upon her heart. It was unmistakably Calvin’s writing.

But when she spoke with Calvin about them, he would not admit to writing them. Calvin’s minor offences were bad enough, but they did not distress her as much as his lies. She often could not tell whether he was telling the truth or not, and if a lie served him better, Calvin chose the lie.

“I want you to stay in, Calvin,” she told him as the children went out for the last recess. She sat at her desk and rested her head on her propped arms. If only he would tell the truth! The book was new. No one else had used it. She looked at the words again on the clean, fresh page. Words—just words—but they soiled and marred the mind like filthy water would foul a clean cloth.

Calvin sat staring sullenly out the window. If only she could talk to his parents. How could she inspire him to be good? She could punish him. True, it would put a guard on his actions, but it would also serve to make him more cautious in the future that he would not be found out.

She wanted him to be good because he loved God. And if he cared for her, his teacher, he would want to please her. *But do I really love him?* she asked herself as she sat there.

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Could Calvin *feel* that she cared about him? It seemed that she hardly spoke to him except to tell him what he should or should not do. But he always hurried out at recess. He was not friendly, like Henry.

But she must do something. Tears smarted her eyes. How she dreaded using the paddle. She thought of the words of Solomon: “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.” She knew it was true. Nothing would likely be as effective as the paddle.

After the unhappy task was done, she talked to Calvin again.

“Saying or writing or even thinking bad words makes a person’s mind dirty, Calvin. And you can’t wash the filth out of your mind with soap and water, like you would your clothes. Think of the Bible verses you have learned. If those bad words come into your mind, say those verses.” Was Calvin thinking about what she was saying? She had no way of knowing. She could not read the expression on his face—was it remorse, resentment, or just plain indifference? She could not tell.

She sat beside him as he copied off a wise saying she wanted him to learn. She watched as he wrote, “Falsehood is cowardice; truth is courage.” Laboriously he copied each word. Sudden tears stung her eyes. She looked away. *Calvin needs a good teacher, a teacher who is wise and firm and gentle and full of love, one who knows how to cope with his boundless energy, one who knows how to bring out the best in him.* She was certain she was not that teacher.