

## *Fourteen Times Fourteen*

M A R I E C H A Y

WHENEVER I TELL anyone that my older brother and I learned the multiplication table through fourteen, no one believes me until one of us gives a demonstration. To the question, "Where in the world did you learn that?" my answer is always, "In Miss Cavender's room, of course."

If the skeptics persist and ask, "In an American school?" my reply is, "Naturally! Where else?" American schools are the only ones my brother and I have ever attended, and before the astounded listener goes on to the next and inevitable question, I always assure them that this school, a square, ugly, dark-red brick building with two rooms, not a bit like the cheerful little red schoolhouse one is always hearing about, was functioning in this, the twentieth century.

Miss Cavender was my brother's and my teacher, as she had been for our mother, and though she had been about fifty at that time, she had not changed in energy, personality, methods of teaching, or dress. She and her sister, "the other Miss Cavender," taught ten grades in the mining camp of Berger's Draw in the Colorado Rockies. Our Miss Cavender taught grades one through six. Both Miss

Cavenders were tall spare women, angular in their features, and as straight and stiff as they had been in my mother's day and long before that. Miss Cavender and her sister dressed alike in long black, brown, gray, or navy-blue skirts and white long-sleeved high-necked blouses. Most of the time they wore high-top shoes, laced or buttoned, but in the summer they wore low-heeled white oxfords and their skirts then were white or light blue.

Our Miss Cavender, like her sister, had a good supply of brooches which she wore at the neck of her blouse, and she also had a gold watch which she pinned to her blouse. Whenever she wanted to see the time, she pulled the watch out on its chain, snapped open the lid, then snapped it shut and let the chain pull the watch back again.

Miss Cavender's pinch-nose glasses, which never fell off anyway, had a chain and a hairpin to anchor them to her hair. In our mother's day, the chain and hairpin were gold; in our day they were silver. That was the only change she had made in her dress during her entire adult life.

Unlike present-day students, who are

asked ever so hesitantly what they expect to get out of school or perhaps even what they want taught and how, we were told in a clear, loud, firm voice by Miss Cavender that first day what we were to do and what she expected of us.

The first grade was to learn to read, write, spell, add and subtract, and tell time by Christmas and to learn the multiplication table through the sixes by the time school was out the last of May. The second grade would learn short division and the multiplication table through fourteen, the third grade long division, and so on. By the time we finished the sixth grade and were ready for "the big grades," we were to prove to Miss Cavender that we had learned and remembered all she had taught us and *knew* the multiplication table through the fourteens. For, as Miss Cavender told us, there might be a time in our lives when we would need to know fourteen times fourteen—"one hundred and ninety-six."

That first day, Miss Cavender also told us there was too much talking going on in the world. Therefore, there were certain things we need never ask about. Signs were more than adequate. Our hand held up, open full, meant we would like to say something. But putting up our hand didn't mean we had permission to speak. It merely meant we were putting in our bid. It was up to Miss Cavender to decide whether or not she would accept it. The index and middle finger raised meant "May I leave the room, please?" Miss Cavender never mentioned the body. Her province was the mind.

The index finger raised by itself meant "May I get a drink, please?" In the spring and fall we were to go outside to the water hydrant and drink from the tin cup chained to it. In winter we were to drink from a tin dipper chained to a bucket of water on a bench near the huge coal heat-

er at the back of the room. "One dipper full is enough for each of you," Miss Cavender said, and we knew that if for some reason we should be dying of thirst, we would never take more than one dipper full because Miss Cavender had said so.

We were also never to be late, either in the morning or after "dinner," and at the end of recess when she rang her little hand bell—not the big one with the rope on the roof of the building, which was rung only at nine and at one—we were to line up at once and come inside quietly.

That first morning, after giving us our instructions, Miss Cavender looked over the first grade. Apparently, she hypnotized us so with her dark-gray eyes and sober face that we all sat quietly at our desks and watched her as she set the other five grades to work and then came back to us.

"Do you know how to read?" she asked in her no-nonsense voice. A few of us did and we nodded, not sure whether this question required an answer in verbal or sign language. "Here then, read," Miss Cavender said and put Aesop's *Fables* before us while she went off to work on those who could not read yet.

When Miss Cavender had gone through the six grades, she came back to us to see how we were getting along. "All right, now we'll do some arithmetic. Do you know how to add and subtract?" she asked. Again some of us nodded, so she gave us some problems to do to see for herself.

"Well, then, you can start on the multiplication table for ones," she said when we were through with our problems, and after starting us off, she went on with her assembly-line duties.

By Christmas time, just as Miss Cavender had told us we would, the entire first grade, though not all in the same way, knew how to add and subtract, spell, read, and

write—after yards and yards of Palmer Method rolls and ups and downs.

Miss Cavender did not know the meaning of our present-day "status symbol," and neither did we. We only knew that some of us were better in some studies than in others, while a few were good in all of them or bad in all. The ones who were the brightest were no credit to Miss Cavender and the dullest were no disgrace to her.

She worked hard with the bright ones because they had the ability and so must use it. She worked just as hard with the slow ones because they didn't have the ability and yet had to do the work she required of all.

It was not for her to exploit pupils to get fame for herself; when some mother or father tried to feel superior because his child was "smarter" than the others, Miss Cavender would crumble them with one of her looks.

"John (or whoever it was) just happened to be born that way," she would say and turn away. No one said a word of protest because, both for us and our parents, Miss Cavender was the law in the camp as far as education was concerned.

Whenever some of us in the lower grades got through with our lessons early, we were allowed, as a treat, to listen in on the "big kids" lessons. In that way we learned geography, history, and civics—no social studies for us.

If the older students finished ahead of time, their treat was to come and help "the little kids," but this was not always as easy as it sounded. If the new "teacher" failed in explaining something to us, Miss Cavender would send him back to his seat with the comment that no one really knows anything unless he can explain it to someone else. The next time, the "big" girl or boy—usually a girl—was not so hasty about telling Miss Cavender that she was all through with her lessons.

There were also times when some of us did not get our lessons. At such times we were told to come up to the square platform, a foot above us, where Miss Cavender had her roll-top desk. Without waiting to be told, we held out our hand, and Miss Cavender took hold of it underneath and whacked the palm with the flat of the ruler. If this was a second offense, Miss Cavender used the edge of the ruler. If it was a third or fourth offense, which was rare, she then used the edge of the ruler on our knuckles.

Miss Cavender always did all this in a matter-of-fact way, with no rancor whatever, and we accepted it that way. She was an adult and as such had to tell us what to do. We were children and so had to follow out those directions. If we did not, then it was inevitable for punishment to follow and we knew it. We had not done our job and so Miss Cavender had to do hers. It was all just part of the world and the rules that were in it.

Miss Cavender had never taken a course in education or in child psychology, she knew nothing of tests and measurements, but she loved children and understood them. We were not little adults to her. We were what we were—children and thus as yet untamed—and she treated us as such, bringing us along little by little, so that by the time we left the sixth grade we would begin to take on the characteristics of human beings and, above all, know the multiplication table through fourteen.

She never fraternized with us, and we did not want it. It was enough to know that during recess Miss Cavender was always at the far end of the playground in the shade of the building with the other Miss Cavender, never seeming to watch us but knowing instantly when something went wrong and doing something about it. Miss Cavender had never heard about feelings of security, but she knew how to give that feeling.

If Miss Cavender were alive now and were told of the "age of teenocracy," she would be neither shocked nor irritated. She would simply ignore it and go on as she always had with perhaps a few more direct looks out of her gray eyes and a few more flicks of the ruler. After that, things would go on as usual; at the end of the sixth grade everyone would be able to do fourteen times fourteen.

The only "-ocracy" Miss Cavender knew was democracy, and that she drilled into us from the first day of school until the end. It was a democracy, she told us (whose parents or grandparents had, for the most part, come from the Continent or the British Isles), that gave us the privilege of going to school free; it was a democracy in the state of Colorado that furnished us with the maps that pulled down like window shades from the wall, the globe of the world to show us the earth was not flat as the maps might have us believe, the American flag, the dictionary, the large black-and-white clock on the wall, and the pictures of Washington and Lincoln on the walls, not to mention the coal heater, the water bucket and dipper, our desks, Miss Cavender's desk and Miss Cavender herself.

When things are not your own property but are only lent to you, she told us almost every day, you have to be extra careful of them so that others after you can also use them. She reminded us to be especially careful with books, not only because they were more fragile than desks but also because it was so much more difficult to make one. "You can learn without all this," she told us, sweeping her hand around the room, "but you can't learn without books."

Miss Cavender even went in for "extra-curricular activities" during the week, though the main one was on Fridays when she broke the routine. At three-thirty we put our work away and cleaned up our

desks, and Miss Cavender then read to us for an hour from books or magazines which she brought from home. Though our day was then half an hour longer, we did not even think of complaining because it meant having someone read to us, letting us forget Berger's Draw and become a part of what we were hearing. Besides, it gave us a feeling of being grown up if we, too, got out at the same time as the "big kids" instead of being babies who were let out half an hour early.

There were other "frills" in Miss Cavender's room besides this one of reading stories. Each morning we sang "America," "The Star-Spangled Banner," "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," and other patriotic songs—"by heart," naturally—and that took care of both our music and exercise periods. Just before time for lunch, we took turns reciting a poem we had learned that week, and we were constantly being urged by Miss Cavender to look at sunsets and sunrises, at wildflowers, trees, rock formations and so on. Then on Wednesday, when we had an hour for art just before the end of the day, we would be able to put on paper what we had seen during the week, preferably in a recognizable form.

Some people may wonder how one person alone could have done all Miss Cavender did—six grades with eight or ten to a grade. The answer is easy. Miss Cavender had nothing to do but teach. By regulating her time, she was able to do her job and do it well. From nine to twelve and from one to four, she had nothing to distract her from her work. Christmas pageants and programs of any kind were the business of the mining camp. Hers was to teach. She had no Parents's Nights to think about or PTA meetings to go to, no reports or lesson plans to write out, no useless or endless committees to take up her time, no teachers's meetings to sit

through while she worried about the papers she should be doing, no groups of community leaders or politicians to visit her classroom and tell her what to do or how or what to teach, and no parents to complain about her treatment of their children or the grades she gave them.

Miss Cavender was an expert in her field, and she had been hired for that reason. It was not up to those who were not experts to tell her what to do. It was all summed up by the mine superintendent when he said, "I don't ask her how to run the mine, and I don't tell her how to run her business either."

On the last day of school we had a full day as usual, plus the thirty extra minutes to hear Miss Cavender read for the last time that year, and then we were given our report cards. The next day, Saturday, we were to meet for the school picnic, with ice cream made by some of the men in the camp and "store" cake, all furnished by the Progressive American Fuel Company which owned Berger's Draw. At nine o'clock, as if we were going to school, we met at the schoolhouse, and Miss Cavender was waiting for us. This time, we noticed, she was all in white, even to a white hat and parasol.

Many of the mothers, with a few sleepy fathers who worked the night shift, and all of the mine officials went in buggies over a rocky mountain road to the picnic grounds some two miles out of town in a

meadow lined with pines. Miss Cavender walked along with us, prim and straight, looking at everything around her and pulling up her skirt now and then as it brushed over rocks and grasses. Everyone in the buggies offered her a ride, but she refused them all, as did her sister. As our parents and the mine officials had never even thought of questioning Miss Cavender and her sister, there was no urgent insistence that they ride.

At the picnic grounds Miss Cavender and her sister stood or sat in the shade of a pine much as they stayed in the shade of the school building during recess. A few of the fathers and even one or two of the younger mothers played ball with us, but not Miss Cavender. We would not have known what to do if she had. When the mine superintendent asked her to come out on the field, we all stopped playing and waited, not knowing whether we were more shocked to hear him ask Miss Cavender to play or to see her get up and come toward us.

"No, thank you, Mr. Clark," we were glad to hear Miss Cavender say in her quick voice. "That's not for me. That's for the children."

Relieved, we went back to our games, feeling safe in knowing that nothing had changed or ever would and our world was still as it was—Miss Cavender in her place up on her platform, and we in ours down below her, learning the multiplication table through fourteen.