

BY THE RAVINE

By Valerie Crichlow

"We are going to build our own house. No more rented homes for us." Julius Fields announced to his children one day. The Fields had decided to build a house on their land at Longentown. In spite of the spacious yard, and many fruit trees enjoyed at their rented home in Chacabaan, the Fields felt the need for a home of their own. It was now a year since they had left Princeville. Julius Fields had left his job in the Brereton oilfields to help his father, as usual, on the Wallenville plantation. His wife had sighed in resignation to the idea. In a few months time, he was on to another job. The family left Princeville and headed for Chacaban, which was situated further north. Mr. Fields would build this house himself. It would be a modest wooden dwelling. Later on, when their fortunes were greater, a larger one would replace it.

Jerri loved Longentown. It lay a mile away to the east, further into the heart of the country. It was well populated, and had schools, churches, shops and other amenities. There was a good taxi service, and a fairly reliable bus service. The train ran through Longentown, and, to her, that was a great attraction. Jerri also loved the sight of large green bushes and wide expanses of untouched wooded areas. She enjoyed the gentle rolling hills, the distant undulating masses of greenery. She adored the misty mornings, and the hushed charm of these rustic settings. The area in which the Fields planned to live, was quite bushy. Few houses stood around. There were tall trees, high grasses, and, to the children's delight, a ravine that ran in the hollow area behind their property. To Jem and Jerri, that ravine held promise of many pleasurable times ahead.

Their father's building efforts were well under way. He had spent long hours clearing the site of trees and bushes. With the help of a few able-bodied friends, the foundation and the main structure of the house were laid. It was all solid and strong. Father always preferred strength to beauty. Mother felt though that anything made strong should yet be pleasing to the eye. She encouraged Father to use a less coarse style in his constructions.

"Eee look good don't it?" he often teased her with a wink and a smile.

One Saturday morning, Mother decided that Jem and Jerri would take Father his cooked hot lunch. They were very excited, and could hardly wait to set out. Father had left for the property before dawn. Mother packed the lunch carefully into a big bag with strong handles. The children dressed and set out on their long trek at ten-thirty. As Jem was older, he was given the bag to carry. He also took along his sling-shot which he tucked firmly into his back pocket. Jerri took along a change of clothes in a small bag. There was no sidewalk, so the children walked steadily along the edge of the road, keeping an eye on the oncoming traffic. Presently, they entered Longentown, and quickened their pace. The sun was already hot, yet they enjoyed the activity: the vehicles moving to and fro, barking dogs, and people going about their various affairs. They trudged along past houses, canefields, through back roads and short-cuts.

"Gosh Jem, look at those plums," Jerri's mouth watered.

She pointed to a tree that stood at the roadside. Jem took out his sling-shot, released a stone at its target, and brought down a rosy bunch of the fruit. The children relished this delicious treat. Further along the way, they had a feast of gauvas picked from a branch that overhung the road. Eventually, long before midday, they arrived at the property. The place was a wilderness of trees and bushes, except where the men had made a clearing for the house. Father, robust as ever, greeted them warmly. He wiped away sweat that trickled down his face that was partly hidden by a hat.

"You had a good walk?" he enquired. They surely did.

Jerri was always happy here. She and Jem admired the progress that Father was making. Things were shaping up nicely.

After lunch, which their father shared with them, they rested. As he dozed in the shade, the children wandered off. They moved in the direction of the ravine. Tin cups in hand, they elbowed their way through the bushes along the narrow path. They stomped on clusters of ti-marie and stinging nettle, elbowed their way through black sage and cusea majo. Jem cut a long stem of the latter plant. As usual, he peeled it easily, and cut it down to the required length. He chewed on it for a minute, then used it to clean his teeth. He had done this many times before, and found it a very relaxing pastime. His sister waited nearby impatiently.

"Come on Jem..." she cried.

They then slid down a grassy bank and entered a wide area, which was their neighbour's garden. They cautiously entered Mr. Marnard's well-planted acre. Here, there were neat rows of corn, peas, ochroes and other vegetables. There were mango and orange trees, along with clumps of banana trees laden with fruit. The children didn't like intruding here, but it was the only way to get to the ravine. They hurried through a maze of cultivated greenery, until abruptly, they came upon the ravine.

The ravine was about four feet wide, and varied in depth from one to three feet. This tiny river bordered the garden, and skirted the undulating lands up ahead. It was long and winding, and hummed over by a myriad of flies, bees, and pretty butterflies. It forked its way along into the distance through groves of mango, orange and banana trees. The ravine coursed gaily along, fanned by scores of leaves of hovering branches. Here and there along the banks, small crabs crawled briskly in and out of holes. Frogs made croaking noises in unison with the lilting melodies of numerous birds nestling in treetops around.

The water looked a dirty brown colour, but the children didn't mind. Their one aim was to catch fish, and they set about it, squatting low on the the grassy bank.

"Look a big wabine over there," shouted Jem.

He claimed to be a great authority on fish. His eyes were wild with delight as he beheld dozens of coscarob, tayta, millions and countless other creatures of the ravine. They had no bait, only tin cups dangling on strings, which they trailed slowly in the water. The tiny creatures wriggled away to safety.

"Oh boy, look at fish...must be catfish..." Jerri was excited.

Moments later, it was Jem, "Goodness gracious...look how much I catch!" he squealed triumphantly.

He counted five one-inch creatures trapped in his tin cup. He poured the slimy lot into a big pan, which he tucked away behind him.

"Oh Jem, you so lucky," wailed Jerri. So far, she had caught none.

Determined, she lowered her small juice can into the muddy depths of the stream. The sun was high in the sky, and they felt its heat, even though they were in a shaded area.

"Wow, more fish for me!" shouted Jem, his eyes shining with success.

Somehow, Jerri just had to catch a fish.

"Keep on trying girl," said Jem consolingly. He moved away, admiring his catch.

Jerri soon grew tired and thirsty. Her tin cup was still empty. Maybe if she went into the water, she could grab at them with her bare hands.

"Eh Jem?" she asked aloud. She looked around, but he was not there.

She kicked off her shoes. Gingerly, she placed one foot into the water. It felt cool and inviting. Butterflies fluttered past her ears, while numerous other insects circled over the water. Jerri put in her other foot. She balanced herself, as her feet sank into the smooth, soft mud of the river bed. She wore trousers, which were tucked firmly up to her knees. The water soon reached to her calves. Eagerly, she grabbed at some little fish moving near her feet. They darted away, and she chased them. The water now moved past her calves. In her desperation, she didn't care that she was in deeper water. Her clothes were damp now, as she splashed around. The little creatures continued swimming around her feet mockingly.

"I must catch one!" she shouted, as she lunged towards the water, with arms outstretched.

She fell headlong into its muddy depths. She struggled to regain her footing. But the water was deeper here, and she seemed to sink lower. Her arms beat the water, as she kept slipping and sliding on the river bed.

"Jem, Jem, help me," she screamed in fear.

Visions of her nine years of life flashed before her eyes. Was she drowning? Why couldn't she stand up? Where was Jem? She felt the dirty brown water in her eyes, her mouth, her hair. Her clothes were soaked and heavy. She kept on slithering in the mud. She grasped at anything in sight. It seemed like if ages had passed, though she knew that only a minute or two had elapsed.

"Jeeeeeeem..." she screamed, now terrified.

Where was her brother who was always there to help her out? She must grab that shrub on the bank, and pull herself out...she must, she must...!

Suddenly, as if from far off, she heard her name called, and felt herself pushed up the bank of the ravine. It was Jem at last.

"Lord, girl, what you doing in this dirty water?"

Jerri felt too exhausted to reply. Jem helped her onto the bank.

"What happened Jerri?" her brother persisted.

"I...I w...was jus tr...trying to to catch a fish," she stammered.

She was trembling, even though it was just after midday.

"Don't worry, you can have some of mine," Jem consoled, putting his arm around her shoulders.

"Let's go by Father," he encouraged.

Jerri felt weak. Jem helped her to her feet. She put on her canvas shoes, and hung on to her brother. He supported her along the uneven path through the bushes.

"You shouldn't go in that water at all...suppose I didn't come back so quick, you couldda ..." he couldn't say it. But Jerri knew that she almost lost her life.

She hung her head dejectedly, and glanced back. Her tin cup was still there, bobbing around on the water. In spite of herself, she smiled secretly. She was beaten this time, but that was alright. She whispered,

"I'll do it next time Jem...I'll catch my own fish next time, you'll see".