

DREAMY JERRI

By Valerie Crichlow

Jerri loved the village of Longentown, particularly the area where they lived. It was wooded, with many trees, grassy slopes, bushes, flowers, birds and butterflies. She was completely at home here. The huge trees fascinated her. There was the Tonca Bean, the Bois Canoe, and the lovely blooms of the Poui, Flamboyant and the Immortelle. She and Jem played hide and seek and romped in the tall grasses nearby. When dusk came, they ran indoors to prepare for supper. After a bath, they soothed their itchy skins with freshly made coconut oil. Jerri loved to go wandering through the bushes collecting flowers, stones and twigs. She enjoyed being alone, and had a lively imagination. She would often lie on the grass beneath a shady tree, and dream, and dream. She sometimes recalled incidents out of her earlier years.

One evening, lying on her stomach on a grassy bank, beneath a large Tonca Bean tree, she recalled the time Mother bought her a pair of shoes which she did not like. They lived at Chacaban then. The shoes were bought from a door-to-door salesman, who was eager to rid himself of his goods.

"Jerri, Jerri," called Mother, "come try on these shoes."

Jerri arrived on the scene. Taking one look at the shoes in question, her heart sank. What an awful-looking pair of shoes! She hoped they didn't fit. Reluctantly, she tried them on. They seemed a size too big. Mother didn't seem to mind though.

"Father always says 'too big is a fit' ", she said.

The salesman shook his head in agreement.

"But Mother, where will I wear these shoes?" Jerri asked in dismay.

"You need school shoes ...these should do..." Mother replied.

The shoes were black, with many straps, and a "baby lou" heel. Jerri hated them. The salesman made encouraging comments. How could Mother buy such ugly shoes for her? Mother mumbled something about a reasonable price, and about the man being so helpful. Jerri felt worse and worse. She was an obedient girl, and never questioned her mother's choice. Mother knew best. However, she was very unhappy.

As Jerri walked to school the next day, she felt self-conscious and uncomfortable in her new shoes. She was also ashamed of the silly little heels. At last she arrived at school. She couldn't endure it anymore. She took the shoes off right away. She and her classmates lined up to enter their classroom, and Jerri walked in barefooted. So, she spent most of the day without shoes. She did her classwork bare-footed. She passed her lunch break bare-footed. Nobody asked her about her shoes, and she was pleased. After all, there were some children who couldn't afford shoes, and habitually went bare-footed. When it was time for home, Jerri put the hated shoes on again. She had no intention of taking

care of these shoes. She would help them to finish really fast. She knocked them about, and kicked at everything in her path. Of course, the poor shoes were done in record time.

"Jerri, you must learn to take care of your shoes," Mother chided her.

Jerri hung her head humbly, but, in her eyes, was a triumphant glint. Thank God those awful shoes were finished.

Jerri stared at a line of ants moving near her, and giggled to herself. What a naughty thing she did. She turned over on her back, staring up at the fluffy white clouds moving slowly across the sky. Then she closed her eyes.

After the shoe episode, it was the affair of the fountain pen. She got into big trouble with Mother for that pen, and it was all his fault...Baje, the vagrant. She grimaced as she remembered what he smelled like. It seemed like Baje had always lived on the street. He was middle-aged, brown-skinned, bare-backed, and bare-footed. A filthy, dark pair of trousers hung from his waist. A greyish piece of rope held it in place. His hair and face had a shaggy, unkempt look. His smile revealed one tooth above, and one below. His feet were grey, cracked and swollen from exposure to the elements and the rough streets of Chacaban. He always carried a brown crocus bag slung across a shoulder. One never knew what it contained, as it was gripped firmly in place. He was nick-named 'Baje,' perhaps because his accent betrayed him to have originated from Barbados.

The school-children of the area never missed an opportunity to torment Baje. Sometimes they saw him sauntering along the streets, as if in search of something. At other times, they would spy him emerging from the compound of the local cinema.

"Baje, Baaaaje," a dozen or more voices taunted out from a safe distance.

Baje would shake his fist and shout obscenities in their direction. Sometimes he even threw stones at them. To the children, this was great fun. They would retreat amidst peals of laughter.

It was on one such occasion that Jerri lost her brand new fountain-pen which Mother had bought her. Mother warned her about keeping it safe. The first time that she took it to school, she felt really proud. It was a lovely black pen, shiny and new, and she kept it tucked safely away in her school-bag. That day, walking home after school, she and Jem came upon a group of school-children who were shouting raucously at the unfortunate knockabout. Just then, Baje, enraged by the persistence of his tormentors, started chasing them, his arms beating the air about him. The children ran shrieking down the sidewalk. Baje grabbed a few stones found near the roadside, and hurled them in the direction of the fleeing group. Jem and Jerri were mere spectators in this swift-moving drama and hurriedly walked by. But when they saw stones coming their way, they took to their heels like the rest.

"Oh Jem, my pen, I dropped it..." wailed Jerri.

"Gosh Jerri, why you have to drop your pen now?" Jem demanded angrily.

"Mother will punish me for this," she whimpered breathlessly.

When they reached a safe distance away from Baje, they stopped. Jem had decided that they must go back and search for the pen. So, when Baje had vanished from the scene, they returned to the spot where Jerri thought that it had fallen. But, the pen could not be found.

"Oh Jem, maybe Baje found it and took it...why this must happen to me...!" Jerri lamented.

Jerri opened her eyes now and sat up. She remembered Mother being very upset on learning of the lost pen. Of course she was punished for carelessness. Jerri didn't want to remember that now. She rose to her feet. She saw thick smoke rising in the direction of her home. What could it be? she wondered. Oh yes, Father was burning coals. She lay down on the grass again, enjoying the cool quiet of the late evening.

She felt tired now. Her eyelids were heavy. She was very sleepy. With her head cradled in her hands tucked behind her head, she dozed off. She drifted into another world, a world where she was eight years old again. The family lived at Princeville then. Jerri's teacher decided to take their class on an outing to an exhibition at the neighbouring town of Charuma. They would walk the one-mile journey with two of their teachers. Jerri and her classmates were very excited. They looked forward to leaving books behind for a change. Everyone must walk with money for the entrance fee to the exhibition. They would return to school in time for the lunch period.

Jerri had a silver coin which she held tightly in her hand. After walking for some time, they had to cross the Charuma river, spanned by a big bridge. The bridge looked awesome. It was a massive iron structure that stretched to about thirty yards across the river. One had to walk on steel planks of about four inches wide, with spaces between them. For support while walking, one could grip the steel planks running along the sides.

As soon as Jerri saw where she had to walk, she was terrified. Many children went ahead of her. Maybe others were afraid too, she didn't notice. Soon it was her turn. She lost her desire for the outing. Her feet were heavy and would not move. She stood blocking the way. Some impatient voices behind caused her to start moving gingerly along. On reaching about a third of the way, she looked down. She beheld the river, deep and menacing below. Cold fear gripped her heart again. If she slipped, she would certainly fall in there. Jerri's feet would move no further. Suddenly, she heard her teacher's urgent voice behind, and felt her hands upon her, impelling her forward.

"Go on Jerri, you can do it," she encouraged.

With her teacher's support, Jerri moved forward. As she did so, her shilling slipped from her wet hand. Down it went. Jerri had no time to look for it. She was sure that it had fallen into the waters below. She moved over the rails at a snail's pace. She must not look down, but move on steadily to the other bank of the river. Finally, she made it, thanks to her teacher's help. It was great to be on safe ground again. Someone passed a coin to her, her own silver coin, which she thought had fallen into the river! Somehow, the joy of the outing was not there anymore for Jerri. She passed the hours away wondering how she would make it on the return journey. How terrible for her! She awoke with a start. Mother must be calling her now. What a nightmare...!

It must be quite late now. An amber ray of sunshine fell across the grass on which she lay. Momentarily, she basked in its golden radiance. If only she could stay here forever. How she loved this place!