

LATE FOR SCHOOL

By Valerie Crichlow

The radio on the shelf gave the time, "seven twenty-five", as Jem and Jerri hustled through the doorway on their way to school. They had to catch the seven-thirty train. "Walk fast children," Mother waved them on. Book-bags slung round their necks, they raced up the grassy path. They moved along the uneven dirt road and on to the main road where vehicles passed. Jerri was sure that they were late for the train. It was all Jem's fault. As usual, he couldn't find his jimboots where he had hidden them the night before. He always said that he had to hide his boots so that his pet puppy Jiffy wouldn't get at them with his sharp teeth. The truth was that Jem just loved the fantasy of turning his room upside down to find a pair of dirty brown canvas boots. It happened often enough that he couldn't find them, and just as often, they had had to run for the train.

The train depot lay a quarter of a mile away from their home in Longentown. It was a brief ten-minute walk. Jem and Jerri were late for the train a few times before. Fortunately, on some of those occasions, the train was late as well. They would reach the depot just in time to see it rounding the bend coming towards them. Jerri prayed that this was one such day.

"Come on Jerri," urged Jem as his sister started lagging behind. Putting her thoughts aside, she tried hard to keep up with her big brother. Their school was situated three miles away in the town of Chacaban. A few months ago, they had left Chacaban to live in Longentown. There were primary schools in Longentown, but their parents thought it best not to send them there. They did not want to interrupt their education. The children were happy with this arrangement. They loved their school and looked forward to the long hours spent there each day.

Just as they reached the top of the road that led down to the depot, they heard the rumbling sound that told of the approaching train.

"O Jem look the train," cried Jerri excitedly.

"Come on, run fast girl!" Jem shouted, and took off at full speed. She chased frantically downhill after him. She knew that if they missed that train, they would have to walk all the way to school, for they had no money for bus or taxi fare. The train was now stationary at the depot, and it seemed for a moment that they would never get to it. Jerri's book-bag fell to the ground. She stopped, grabbed it and shot off again.

"Jerri...run..." There was panic in Jem's voice now.

They reached the tracks just as the train was about to pull out.

"Come on girl," shouted Jem, as he heaved himself up by a door-handle onto a step that seemed too high up. The train was moving slowly, and Jerri moved along too, trying to get hold of something that would hoist her up. The carriages on big iron wheels towered over her threateningly. Then as awful

scenes flashed through her mind, she felt herself yanked up those high steps. She looked up, and there was Jem, big and strong, with a triumphant spark in his eye. She clambered up and clung to her brother in sheer relief.

Luckily, no one was around to chide them for their daring. They received many curious glances as they entered a carriage half full of school children. Exhausted, they sank into some nearby seats. As the train rolled noisily down the tracks, Jerri realized how dreadful she looked. Her blouse was torn, her skirt was soiled, and her ribbon untied. Anyway they were on the train, and that was all that mattered.

"I wonder what Mother will say about these clothes," remarked Jerri to her brother, as she tidied herself.

Jem shrugged, "Maybe Miss Smith will fix it up for you."

Their season tickets were examined by the Ticket Inspector. The first leg of the journey took ten minutes. The train then stopped at Joachim Junction, where everyone disembarked. Here the rails crisscrossed and looked confusing. Some trains were parked and waiting. Jem and Jerri leaned on the stationhouse, awaiting the south-bound train that would take them to Chacaban. That would be another ten minute ride. Brother and sister waited in silence. The station clock showed eight o'clock, and yet there was no sign of the train. There were people everywhere, mainly schoolchildren. Amidst the chatter and commotion, someone suddenly shouted,

"Look she coming!"

Everyone grew alert, as the train loomed in the distance. It pulled into the station noisily. Soon it was all aboard, and the great vehicle groaned off down the lines. Then came Singh, the ever present, friendly, rotund channa-man with his big basket and customary chant:

"Groundnuts, channa, saltnuts, cashewnuts, nuts already shelled."

Singh was as familiar as the trees, the grass and the scattered wooden houses that flew past the open carriage windows.

The train sped along to the Chacaban Railway Station. Jem and Jerri alighted, and walked briskly down the platform that ran alongside it. Their school was still a good distance away. The big clock on the grey station wall showed eight twenty five, as again they set out for school. The bell rang promptly each morning at eight thirty. They usually arrived just in the nick of time for it. Jem walked at a steady pace, and Jerri endeavoured to keep up with him. As they hurried along, Jerri became afraid, for children were often punished for lateness.

"Oh Jem, you think we have to go in the late line?" she lamented.

"Maybe we should run, he suggested, and started off.

She lagged behind, and gained little comfort in the fact that other children were coming behind

them. She caught up with Jem at the school gate.

"Well it's late-line today," Jem's tone was matter-of-fact now.

"Oh no," moaned Jerri as they entered at the school gate.

Assembly was in progress, and the headmaster, Mr. Barker, was addressing the school in his usual stern tones. Late-line was a separate line of pupils placed behind those assembled. At a glance, one could tell who was late, for no one entering the school after prayers, was allowed to join the main group. Jem and Jerri and a few others stood apart. Jerri was scared and dejected. It wasn't their fault that they were late. Eventually the other pupils filed off to their classrooms, while the latecomers were left behind. Mr. Barker was in charge of late-line for the week. Jerri's heart sank as he approached. Countless images flashed across her mind about the wrath to come.

"Well well, what have we here?" he thundered.

The headmaster was a short, bald, slightly greying man who seldom smiled. He surveyed them sourly. He was notorious for his severity with the strap. He questioned them about their lateness. Jerri stammered something that was barely audible, and Jem spoke up like a big brother.

"It was the train Sir, we travel by the train Sir, it was the train that made us late Sir." Jem was hoping to quell the storm that was threatening. But Mr. Barker was in a foul mood.

"Put it out," he growled.

To Jerri the world stood still for a moment, as the thick leather strap descended thunderously upon outstretched palms. It pained, but she was determined not to cry. The others with less worthy excuses were made to stand in the sun, nursing their wounded hands and pride.

What a way to start the day, Jerri thought. As she entered her class that day, dozens of curious eyes peered at her. She winced. As she took her seat, she glanced pitifully out at the less fortunate ones standing in the sun. She looked down at her soiled, rumpled clothes, and soothed her still burning palms.

"Take out your Arithmetic books please," Miss Smith called urgently. A big tear tumbled down Jerri's cheeks, onto her desk.

Class had begun.