

RED RIDING HOOD

By Valerie Crichlow

For as long as she lived, Jerri would never forget that Friday and the shame that it brought her. Had she guessed what was in store for her that day, she would certainly have convinced her mother that she was too ill to leave home that morning. Of course Mother would have allowed her to remain at home, for after all, it was only the last day of school. The school term was drawing to a close. It was Jem and Jerri's first term spent at Chacaban Government School, and they were enjoying it. To Jerri, it seemed so long ago since she had started at this new school. It was Father who had taken them both to their new school.

Jerri remembered well how it was. Father had taken his bicycle along with him, steering it along with one hand, and ushering the children along with the other. He was clean-shaven with slightly greying hair. He was of medium height, heavy and well-built, with a wide strong belt at the waist. He had a firm, strong gait that revealed a good-natured temperament.

Vehicles roared by as the children, clutching their bookbags strove to keep up with their father. They walked the mile-long journey full of expectancy. As they approached the school, hearts filled with trepidation, their footsteps slowed. Father led the way to the headmaster's office. From then onwards, everything to Jerri became a blur. She was aware of a short thickset man, rotund at the middle. He had a round balding head, and an unpleasant, bespectacled face, crowned by a forehead with a huge bump in the middle. There was no kindness in his beady eyes, and Jerri was glad when they had left his office. Father waved goodbye, and she and Jem were escorted to their separate classes.

The Christmas vacation was near. There was much excitement in the air, as preparations were being made for the annual Christmas concert, and class parties. Miss Smith, Jerri's class teacher had announced permission for wearing of party clothes, instead of the usual school uniform. Everyone in Jerri's class, Standard Five A, was elated, especially the girls, who grasped every opportunity to leave dull school uniforms behind. Jerri was indifferent. It didn't matter to her what she had to wear, for she was a tomboy at heart anyway. However, all of her friends were planning to wear dresses, so she decided to do the same.

"Mammy buying a new dress for me," Ann Marie, her best friend cried gaily as they walked home after school that day.

Jerri remained silent. She knew that her mother could not afford to buy her a new dress for that occasion. On reaching home that day, she told her mother about coming events at school.

"You can wear one of your church dresses Jerri," Mother advised.

"But Mother, they just don't look good for school," she wailed, close to tears. She lamented the fading colours of the dresses mentioned.

"Ok Jerri, we'll see what can be done," Mother consoled and hurried off. Jerri felt better and went off to her chores.

After supper that evening, Mother told of a plan to sew the dress herself. She had had a piece of fabric tucked away somewhere, planning to make something for herself. Now, it was Jerri's.

"Oh thanks Mother," cried Jerri happily. It was already Tuesday though, and Mother had just two days to sew the dress. Jerri must keep her fingers crossed.

At last Friday arrived. Jem and Jerri were up at the crack of dawn. The morning was bright and sunny as they hurried through their chores. They had breakfast and got dressed. Jerri was pleased with the dress that Mother had made her. It was red and sleeveless, with a large round collar piped with white embroidery. The blouse was joined at the waist to the skirt, made of three frills also piped with white. She wore white shoes and socks and a white bow in her hair. She was pleased with what she saw in the mirror.

"You look OK Jerri," Jem surveyed his sister approvingly.

At nine, Jerri was long-legged and tanned. Her black hair was washed and neatly combed back into a neat plat by her mother. She had shy eyes and a quiet look that hid the tomboy traits of her daily activities. Jem too had cast aside his school clothes for a sportier outfit. They skipped down the front step, and trotted off gaily. It was great to be without books for a change, and they exulted in the feeling. It seemed to Jerri that day that everyone they passed was smiling and lovely. Somewhere along the way, a voice called out, "Red Riding Hood..." Jerri smiled to herself. They made their usual trek along the busy streets of Chacaban, meeting many friends along the way.

The school bell was very late that morning. Jerri and Ann-Marie amused themselves hopping about, chatting and looking in on all the classrooms to gaze at all the beautiful Christmas decorations. There were balloons of all colours, paper and tinsel hangings, blackboards coloured with Christmas trees and the season's greetings. Christmas music and the delicious smell of goodies filled the air. There was laughter everywhere. Pupils and teachers alike were all gaily dressed for the occasion. It seemed as if everyone was caught up in the atmosphere of merriment - everyone, except the headmaster.

George Barker lived alone in a big house on the outskirts of Chacaban. It was often whispered around the town that his wife had left him, and run off with another man at Christmas time. Since then, he had become more moody and bad-tempered. Christmas was the time of year when his company seemed most forbidding. His house had no laughter, none of the season's cheer. It was said that he spent Christmas-day drunk in his library.

Mr. Barker rang the bell himself that morning. As he did so, he regarded the assembly with the usual frown upon his brow. He was by no means a pleasant man in appearance. He was middle-aged, dark-skinned and partly bald, short and stocky, with a bump upon his forehead. He walked with measured steps, arms clasped behind, head thrust forward, with spectacles almost falling off his stern face. When Mr. Barker smiled, and that was a rarity, it was as if he sneered, and one felt uncomfortable. Jerri was more at ease with his scowl, for that was more familiar. The classes formed

neat rows across the paved yard. Morning prayers were recited as usual, and then it all began.

The headmaster was decked in his usual tie, long-sleeved shirt, and dark trousers. He started by commanding the attention of both teachers and pupils alike. He hoped that everyone would remember that whether in or out of uniform, discipline at Chacaban Government School remained the same. Somewhere behind Jerri, someone sighed in boredom,

"Same ole talk..."

To the pupils, their headmaster was the Scrooge of Chacaban because of his joyless Christmases. His life seemed like a long dreary experience, and he tried to make no one happy. To Jerri, he seemed out of place on such merry occasions. All around, there were girls in their dresses, some pretty, others ordinary. Few pupils wore the school uniform, and Jerri was glad not to be one of them for a change.

"Remember to use the garbage bins today. All offenders would be dealt with severely."

Mr. Barker continued in this vein for a while. He hardly mentioned anything about Christmas, or the day's activities. The sun suddenly felt very hot, and Jerri wished that the headmaster would feel it too. He always stood in the shade though...the selfishness of some people...he must be a very unhappy man...Jerri's mind wandered off dreamily.

"You there in that fiery red dress, come out here!" boomed the headmaster.

Jerri jumped visibly. Could it be her? But no, she had done nothing wrong.

The headmaster insisted, "That girl in the bright red dress over there... teacher get that girl out here!" His voice was like thunder. It was Jerri. She was weak with fear and embarrassment. She was taken from the line, and made to stand before the entire school.

"Look at that dress, the colour is too bright, it hurts the eyes...a good example of what you must not wear. I don't know how some parents could dress children like this...such poor taste. Child tell your mother not to send you here in such a loud colour again!"

Jerri felt hot with shame. She fought back the tears. She felt like sinking through the ground. She faced a sea of eyes that seemed alive with scorn and pity.

Jerri was not sure how she survived that day. Her once beautiful dress now seemed to her a thing of ugliness. She wished to return home, but no one could leave without the headmaster's permission. The concert was held later that morning. In the afternoon, class parties were in full swing. Everyone was laughing, chatting, eating, playing games, and having a good time. Jerri's friend Ann-Marie tried hard to make her feel better, but to no avail. Jerri remained unhappy. She was angry at Mr. Barker for spoiling things for her.

"Girl, forget dat boring ole man. He jus like to pick on people like dat...and besides, your dress looking nice to me..."

"She can say anything", thought Jerri, "after all, her dress was blue...and no one had made a fool of her..."

So Jerri suffered through the class party, just as much as she had done with the concert. Every time someone looked at her, she imagined that they were accusing her in some way, or laughing at her dress.

That afternoon, as the children walked home, Jem did his best to cheer up his sister. Soon, she became her old self again. After all, no old Scrooge could destroy her joy of the season. Determinedly, she pushed her bad experience out of her mind, and skipped along beside her brother on their way home.

Later, as she undressed in her room, she admired her new dress again. It was pretty, and she would wear it often. "Red Riding Hood", someone had called her. She smiled happily, lay down on her bed and went to sleep.