

TROUBLE FOR JEM

By Valerie Crichtlow

Jem was always crazy about bicycles. At eleven, he seemed to know everything about them. It seemed as if Jem had always known how to ride a bicycle. Jerri couldn't remember a time when he couldn't. He was big and muscular for his age, and very active. He often sneaked Father's bicycle out, and cycled merrily around the yard. There was a shed in the back-yard, where Mother did her washing. In a corner of this shed, Jem set up his "garage". There he stored all the bits and pieces and bicycle parts that he treasured. Jerri never understood where all those pieces of metal came from.

Jem spent much time in that back-yard shed tinkering with an old broken bicycle that Father didn't want anymore. He would spend hours trying to repair it, and experienced many a fall when he tried riding it. Jem knew how to take that old bicycle apart and put it back together again. He knew all about tyre and tube, how to change a "flat" and put on a "patch". He could use pump, pliers, and spanner, ride "one hand" and even give Jerri a tow around the yard. Of course, his hands and clothes were often black and messy with grease when he emerged from this pastime.

"Jem...I will put you over the tub to scrub those clothes," Mother would threaten.

Nevertheless, Jem was always boasting about "when I get my own bike..."

Whenever Father was at home, and his bicycle available, Mother would allow Jem to run errands for her on it.

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon. Mother decided to send Jem out to purchase a few items needed for her usual weekend baking. Father was not at home, but the bicycle was there, and Jem could use it.

"Ride carefully Jem, and use the short-cut", Mother advised.

Jem, sure of himself, mounted the bicycle, and moved off proudly through the yard, and down the street. He would push on the pedals for a few yards, then hoist himself on to the seat, straining to reach those pedals with his feet again.

"Use the short-cut Jem," he heard Mother's voice again.

The Fields encouraged their children to take the short-cut route as much as possible. It was a route made possible by school-children, eager for adventure as they walked home after school. It was also a safer route, because the main road was always busy with traffic. There was no pavement for pedestrians, and therefore, walking along the main road was dangerous. So, very often, school-children used the short cut. It was a route running parallel to the main road, fairly wide, and unpaved.

When it rained, there were some mud and water puddles to jump over. At one point, one had to cross a drain, and enter a narrow path with low bushes on either side. This path led onto a paved

street, which led out to the end of the short-cut. Along the short-cut route, there were many small houses and one large one where many children played. They often ran onto the road itself, laughing and chasing each other.

Jerri was in the kitchen with Mother on that quiet afternoon helping to prepare dough for sweet-bread. Suddenly the backdoor was flung open, and in rushed Jem, panting and breathless.

"Mother, Mother, the man take the bicycle, and carry it in the station..."

Mother looked alarmed, "what man, child?...what happened?...what trouble is this now?" She grabbed him by the shoulders, trying to steady him. Jem was wet with perspiration, and he looked scared. His shirt was unbuttoned, and the grocery bag had fallen unto the step behind him.

"Is a little girl...that I knock down... Some children from the big house in the short-cut were playing in the road...the little girl run right across jus as I was passing, and the bike knock her down. Then a man run out of the big house shouting and cursing. He took the bike from me and say he carrying it in the Police Station..."

"Jem were you riding fast?" Mother looked upset now.

"No Mother just the usual way...but the girl run across all of a sudden".

"Was the girl hurt in any way?" asked Mother anxiously.

"No Mother, she wasn't hurt much...but the man was real mad...he say Police will put me in jail..." Jem was close to tears; his eyes were quite red.

Suddenly Mother became busy, dusting herself and washing away the dough that clung to her fingers.

"Jerri you finish up for me here...fix up these bread for the oven. I have to go down to the Station with Jem.

"Yes Mother." Jerri was glad to take charge of the kitchen for a change.

It was not until later that night that Jerri heard the full account of what happened at the Station. By then, Father had returned home. He pondered the situation, and repeated his constant warnings to Jem to "take his time" on the road. Mother related how she and Jem made the half-mile journey down to the Chacaban Police Station. It was late in the afternoon, and pleasantly cool. Mother used to be fearful of Police Stations, until a time when she had had to seek police help against a threatening neighbour; that was how Jerri had acquired a god-father who was a very helpful police sergeant. Mother had often recounted that story. So, this time, she went bravely to the station. She and Jem walked up the dark wooden steps to the door. A young police officer in uniform sat behind a long desk.

"Can I help you Madam?" he enquired, seeing her troubled look.

In her best tone, Mother proceeded to explain her purpose.

"Allright Madam, the officer in charge of your case would be here shortly...you can have a seat over here."

He led Mother and Jem to a small room nearby, where they were comfortably seated. Suddenly Jem held onto Mother's arm,

"Mother, look... dat is the man sitting down in the back there... the same man who take away my bicycle..."

Mother looked around to where Jem was pointing. She saw a passageway leading to a small room at the end. There seated at a small table were two policemen and a third man dressed in civilian clothes. They were drinking beers, talking and laughing loudly among themselves. Jem was excited, and Mother was shocked.

She whispered,

"Quiet Jem, let's wait and see what happens."

After a fifteen-minute wait, a voice shouted close by,

"Where is the man who knocked down the child?" This was evidently the officer on whom they were waiting. A burly stern-looking man appeared before them.

"It's not a man, only a boy...my eleven year old son here," Mother explained.

"What...a boy!" the officer was taken aback.

"Son," he looked at Jem, "tell me how it happened."

Jem bravely related the incidents just as they had occurred. He pointed to the drinkers in the nearby room to indicate the man who had taken his bicycle away to the station.

"Well well well," the big man exclaimed, "this matter will be settled here, right now."

He assured Jem that he would not go to jail. He then proceeded to instruct Jem about cycling along roadways. He told him about looking out for pedestrians, and about the dangers of riding too fast. He made him sign a slip of paper, and thumped him on the back. He also shook hands with Mother. He then returned the offending bicycle to them. It was in good condition, except for a flat tyre.

As Mother and Jem left the station that evening, the raucous laughter of the back-room drinkers lingered in their ears.

"Spiteful man," Mother remarked, "and the child was not even hurt."

Jem was happy now. Father's bicycle was safe. Besides, Jem didn't have to go to jail.