



CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS

**SNEAK  
PEEK  
SAMPLE  
CHAPTER**

# Over Our Way

Jean D'Costa and Velma Pollard



# MILLICENT

**Merle Hodge**

*For Faith Ann Gore and Nona Magdalene Mitchell*

FOURTH STANDARD WAS a very ordinary class. They came to school for nine o'clock like any other class – or most of them came to school for nine o'clock – for when the bell rang, Clem and Harry were usually just pelting across the *savannah*. Clem had to tie out his grandmother's goat before he came to school and Harry had to deliver bottles of milk. They were neighbours, and nearly every morning they dashed into the school-yard together and managed to slide in at the back of the line just as Mr Greenidge was closing the gate. Anybody who arrived after the gate was shut had to stand outside and wait until Mr Greenidge was ready to let them in and lead them to the Headmaster's office.

Fourth Standard was very ordinary. They had as many fights as anybody else. They fought over the duster because everybody wanted to clean the blackboard; they fought over who was to be at the head of the line in the mornings; they fought in Miss Aggie's parlour at recess-time and at lunch-time, fought and pushed like anybody else to get their dinner-mints or sweet-biscuits or tamarind-balls. And they didn't fight when it was their turn to clean the latrines; then, they just ran and hid all over the place.

There were twenty-two girls and eighteen boys, so the girls always won when the class played cricket or tug-of-war, girls against boys.

Fourth Standard had its Duncy-Head and its Bright-Spark like any other class. Joel Price couldn't read further than page nine. He was stuck at page nine for so long that he could say it by heart with his eyes closed, but when Miss turned the page and he saw page

ten he would hang his head and his eyes filled up with water. And Emily Joseph was so bright that everybody said that her mother gave her bulb porridge in the morning and bulb soup in the night.

Miss was nice sometimes. She didn't beat as much as Mr Gomes or Mrs Davies, and she didn't beat for silly little things like forgetting your pen at home or getting all your sums wrong.

But she got very angry if somebody talked while she was talking. Sandra and Shira were always getting into trouble, because they chatted and chatted like a pair of parrots all day long. Miss promised them that when we went on the zoo outing she was going to put them in the big cage with the parrots and leave them there. Miss said the parrots at the zoo had a nice big roomy cage big enough for two talkative young ladies to take up residence, and the parrots would be glad of their company.

Other things she would beat for were not doing your homework, and stealing. When something was stolen, nobody knew how she found out who the thief was, but Miss was always right. As soon as she learned that there had been a theft, she tapped the ruler on the table to call the class to attention. Then she stood and stared at us; she looked at our faces one by one, very slowly, and when she had looked at everybody in turn, she started again from the front row, while everybody sat and held their breath; and then her eyes stopped at one face and everybody breathed again, and all turned to see who the culprit was. In Fourth Standard you couldn't get away with stealing.

Miss was nice because she took her class outside more often than anybody else. The other children all envied Fourth Standard because whenever the afternoon got really hot, we would be seen filing out towards the savannah. Anybody who talked or made any noise on the way out would be sent back to sit with their book in the empty classroom, but of course nobody was willing to run this risk, so we filed out silently and in the most orderly manner.

Miss said that Fourth Standard was the worst class in the school, but we knew that she'd said the same thing to every Fourth Standard class she'd had, so we didn't believe her. For, all things considered, Fourth Standard was no better or no worse than any other class; they were a very ordinary class.

And then Millicent came. Millicent came and brought pure ruination.

One Monday morning there she was, sitting in the third row in a bright red organdy dress and red ribbons and smelling of baby powder. She was sharing a desk with Parbatee and Eric and Vena and Harry. The desk was only made for four, but Miss put her there because Parbatee and Eric and Vena and Harry were all very small and didn't quite fill up the bench. But there was Millicent sitting in the middle, with her elbows sprawled on the desk on either side of her, and her skirt spread out on the bench, so that Parbatee and Eric were squeezed together at one end of the bench, and Vena and Harry looked as though they were about to fall off the other end. Millicent sat like a queen in the middle.

The other four sat cramped for the whole morning, barely able to write, but not daring to complain, for Millicent and her red organdy dress filled them with awe.

But by mid-afternoon Millicent had taken over so much of the bench that Harry really fell off his end. All we heard was a little crash, because Harry was not very big (in fact, we called him 'Mosquito'). We heard a crash and a small shriek and Harry was sitting in the aisle ready to burst with anger.

Everybody laughed, the class was in uproar. Miss was laughing helplessly too, but then she made her face stern again and tapped the ruler on the table. Harry picked himself up and stayed standing in the aisle, looking at Millicent in such a way that if looks could kill, Millicent would have dropped down dead in her red organdy dress.

‘Millicent, you will sit at the end,’ said Miss.

‘NOPE!’ said Millicent and she folded her arms, pouted her mouth and stayed where she was.

Everybody was shocked. This girl must be crazy! We stopped all our laughter and stared in amazement. Even Harry forgot to be angry and stared dumbfounded at Millicent, then at Miss, from one to the other.

There was complete silence. We were a little excited, waiting to see what would happen next, looking at Miss’s face.

‘Come out here, ma’am,’ said Miss.

Millicent still sat with her arms tightly folded and her mouth pushed far out like a pig-snout. Then Miss started to get up, her chair grated on the floor. Our hearts beat faster. This crazy girl didn’t know our Miss – she wasn’t afraid of her in her organdy dress, she would put the ruler on her, organdy dress or no organdy dress.

But when Millicent saw that Miss was going to come for her, she suddenly sprang up and pushed Vena off the bench to get out. Vena didn’t fall right down, but she hit her elbow on the edge of the desk, and that made her so angry that she flew at Millicent and landed her a cuff right in the middle of her chest. Miss rushed down the aisle and parted them.

Millicent was crying loudly, saying she was going to tell her Auntie June, and she didn’t like this old dirty country-school, and her father was going to come and take her back to Belmont ...

Miss clapped her hands sharply:

‘Get your spelling books, everybody outside, no noise; and you ma’am, if you make one more sound, you will sit down right here by yourself.’

The rest of us were nearly outside already, Millicent stood sniffing still, rather bewildered at the sight of the classroom emptying around her. Then she wiped her nose and followed.

Out on the savannah we quickly settled down, some sitting on the grass, some on the old tree trunk. Joel brought the chair for Miss.

Millicent stood apart and looked on scornfully. We soon forgot about her, because there was a nice breeze blowing, and Miss asked us easy words – even Joel was able to spell two whole words, so he was wearing a broad smile. Everybody forgot about Millicent. We didn't even know she had walked off.

And then suddenly the ground seemed to shake and we heard something like thunder mixed with screaming, and we looked and saw this red shape flying across the savannah towards us. In one second there was a stampede. We had tumbled off the tree trunk, those on the grass had scrambled to their feet, spelling books were lying scattered on the ground and the whole of Fourth Standard was running, pelting towards the school, everybody screaming with all their might.

Mr Jeremy's bull was loose! And nobody knew how Millicent had managed to offend Mr Jeremy's bull, but it was chasing her furiously, pounding after her, snorting and cursing her in cow language, and she was tearing across the grass, her red organdy dress flying in the breeze.

Nobody looked back until we were inside the school-yard. Then we looked out and saw Miss bringing Millicent, who was crying bitterly, holding one of her ribbons in her hand, the sashes of her dress hanging down.

The next morning, Millicent appeared in a bright yellow organdy dress and yellow ribbons. She sat at the end but placed her big plaid bag on the bench beside her because, she said, she didn't want either Picky-Head *Congo Vena*, or Roti-Coolie Harry near her. Vena went and complained to Miss.

Again we held our breaths. Once, when we had just come up to Fourth Standard, she shared licks for half an hour one afternoon when she got the news that at lunch-time a little fight between



Carl and Deo had grown into a war, with nearly the whole of Fourth Standard divided into two gangs calling each other Coolie and N—r. She told us that everybody's great-grandfather was both a Coolie and a N—r – Deodath's great-grandfather was a N—r and Carl's great-grandfather was a Coolie, because Coolie and N—r just meant beast of burden, and that all our great-grandparents were made to be, but if that was what we wanted to be then she would lick us like beasts of burden; she sent a boy to borrow Mr Gomes's strap, went on the rampage and shared out some unforgettable licks. That was the last of that.

When Vena went and complained to Miss, she shot up and strode down the aisle to Millicent.

'Pick up your bag, ma'am,' she said.

Millicent held on to her bag, and Miss yanked her out of the seat and marched her to the back of the class. She told the children in one of the back rows to take their desk to the front, while she sent some others to get one of the old desks from downstairs.

This ruction lasted for about fifteen minutes and we enjoyed it thoroughly. At the end of it all, the back row children were installed in front, and in the back row, on an old rickety desk for four, sat Millicent and her plaid bag. Millicent in her yellow organdy dress. She was not very pleased.

At recess time she picked up her bag and walked solemnly to Miss Aggie's parlour (everybody else ran to be there first). When she got there, she didn't join the pushing and jostling; she just stood, looking so angelic in her yellow organdy dress and yellow ribbons that Miss Aggie was impressed, stopped serving us and called out to her:

'What you want, little girl?'

Millicent smiled sweetly, took one step forward and the whole unruly crowd of us fell silent and automatically parted in two,

making way for her. She walked to the counter and put down a dollar bill. A whole dollar bill! Our eyes nearly fell out of our heads, and a low sound of ‘Oooooo!’ rose from the crowd.

‘Ten cents’ dinner-mints please, and ten cents’ paradise plums, and six cents’ saltprunes, and ...’ Miss Aggie moved from bottle to bottle, her eyes widening all the time.

Millicent spent the whole dollar. She stuffed all that she had bought into the bag and turned to go. We were following her every movement. She walked out of the parlour without looking right or left.

By afternoon recess, Millicent sat on a bench in the yard surrounded by a court of seven. These were the Chosen Few: Clem, Diane, Shira, Joel, Anthony, Fazeeda and Gayle. Their mouths were full, and as they chewed away, their eyes were fixed admiringly upon Millicent.

The next morning Millicent arrived in a pink dress, and Miss asked her when she was going to get her uniform. She said her Auntie June hadn’t got it yet.

At recess-time as she sat holding court, she was heard to say loudly to her group of admirers:

‘She think I don’t have my uniform hanging up in my press? What I must wear uniform for? I not wearing any uniform. I have a whole press full of clothes and shoes and toys ...’

The news reached Miss, and that afternoon Millicent went home with a letter from Miss to her Auntie June. The next morning Millicent came to school wearing a blue overall, white blouse and a scowl on her face. She was very sour indeed.

That morning Clem came to school without Harry. Millicent had told him to have nothing to do with Harry or she wouldn’t talk to him anymore.

At lunch-time, we started up a game of cricket. Faraz and Anthony were the best batters, and Gayle could bowl down wickets like peas, so everybody wanted them on their side.



Somebody went to look for Gayle and Anthony. They were in the parlour with Millicent and they didn't feel like playing cricket. So the rest of us played a stupid, dull game.

When Sandra came back from lunch she went in search of Shira, for she had so much to tell her, and they hadn't had a chance to talk in class all morning, because Miss had kept her eye on the two of them. She didn't get to talk to Shira at morning recess either, because she spent the whole of recess in the latrine. Her mother had given them salts the day before, and that was one of the things she had to tell Shira about – how her mother and her grandmother had to run after the six of them, round and round the house, until they caught them one by one and held their noses and made them drink the salts. She was dying to get into a cosy conversation with Shira.

She looked around the savannah for her and didn't find her. Then she went into the schoolyard, walked around, and spotted her on the tank with some others playing jacks. She ran happily towards her, calling out her name:

'Shira! Shira!'

Shira turned around to see who it was and then coldly turned her back. Sandra thought she hadn't seen her and went right up to the tank and touched Shira on her shoulder.

Shira brushed her off: 'Leave me in peace, nuh!'

Sandra was flabbergasted and didn't move. Millicent drew herself up.

'You wash your foot before you come in the dance? Shoo! We don't want any picky-head tar-babies here.' And the rest of the gang giggled.

Sandra ran away and hid in a corner until the bell rang.

By the end of the week Millicent's gang had grown to fifteen. They stopped playing on the savannah. Millicent brought a fancy skipping-rope, jacks, Ludo, dominoes and pretty storybooks. With these, as well as all the sweets she bought, she held them captive at recess and at lunch-time.

She got them to run to the parlour for her, do her homework, fetch water for her in her pretty Mickey-Mouse cup.

The rest of us didn't know what to do. Nobody any longer thought of going and telling Miss on her. For there were a lot of us who would have given anything to join Millicent's gang and didn't want to offend her. And even those who hated her were afraid of her.

Fourth Standard became a sour, quarrelsome class. Millicent's gang didn't have much to do with the rest of us, and the rest of us had more fights among ourselves than ever before. We began to call each other 'Cassava N—r' and 'Pelorie Coolie', terms we had learnt from Millicent. Almost every time we started a game it ended in a fight. Somebody always said the scorekeeper was cheating or the bowler was aiming the ball at the batsman's belly for spite.

And Millicent reigned supreme. She managed not to get any licks because her homework was always done, and she couldn't get into trouble for talking in class when there was nobody sitting with her.

And she didn't get any licks at home either. Everybody knew that her Auntie June let her stay up until any hour she wanted, even midnight; that she never had to wash dishes or sweep; that when she got home from school, she just sprawled off in an armchair and her Auntie June took off her shoes and socks for her and immediately brought her ice-cream and cake; that her mother, who was in America, sent her a box full of clothes and shoes and toys every week ... Millicent was a heroine out of a story-book.

We no longer considered her to be sitting in disgrace at the back of the class in the desk all by herself. She was a princess sitting on a throne, and nobody was really good enough to sit on the same bench as Millicent.

Of course Miss knew that all was not well in the class. She called Harry and asked him why he and Clem didn't come to school together any more. Harry's eyes filled up with water and he wouldn't say a word. She called Clem and asked him. Clem wriggled uncomfortably and said his grandmother made him get up earlier to go and tie out the goat, and he couldn't wait for Harry again. Tears started to run down Harry's cheeks. Everybody felt ashamed, but nobody would say a word, for Millicent was sitting surveying us all from her throne at the back of the class.

Miss sent Harry and Clem back to their seats.

'So nobody in this class has anything to tell me this week,' she said, 'not even the news-carriers. Hm.'

We sat and squirmed. Miss looked at everybody, then she looked straight over our heads to the back of the class and said, slowly and terribly:

'Pride goeth before a fall.'

Nobody had the faintest idea what this meant, but we knew it meant something very grim and unpleasant. Everybody knew that she had looked at Millicent as she said it, but no one dared even glance back at Millicent. Nobody would risk offending Millicent.

Matters grew worse over the next few weeks. Millicent threw Joel out of her gang. She had sent him to the parlour with ten cents to buy three cents' dinner-mints, five tamarind balls and a packet of chewing gum, and he came back with twenty dinner-mints. She told him he was so stupid he had no right to live. Joel cried for two days.

We all knew that Millicent would now be looking around for a new member to replace Joel, so we were extra courteous to her for the next few days. We remarked to each other how nice Millicent's hair-style was, how clean her crepesoles, how enviable her complexion; we vowed within her hearing that we couldn't

stand blackie Picky-Head N——rs and greasy *Roti-Coolies*. We declared that we found Miss to be an out-of-place frowsy old hog, always trying to boss people about. We smiled nervously at Millicent, who ignored us completely.

And soon Millicent's verdict was made known: the new member was Christine Reece. The rest of us were heartbroken. We now hated Christine Reece with all our might, but continued to do everything we could to get into Millicent's good books.

Nobody bothered to start any games on the savannah any more. We hung about the schoolyard and sulked, casting envious sidelong glances at Millicent and her gang. And Millicent continued to look upon us with scorn.

Then it was the end-of-term test. Millicent announced that she was coming first, that Emily Joseph didn't know as much as she knew because she didn't have all the books that she had, and Emily's mother couldn't buy Brain Food for her like *her* mother sent from America.

And there was no question in anybody's mind – of course Millicent was going to come first. She was the prettiest, richest, luckiest, bravest, quickest, funniest, cleanest, healthiest child in the class, so naturally she was also the brightest; she didn't even have to say so, for everybody knew. Even Emily Joseph knew. Emily Joseph wouldn't dare come higher than Millicent.

Miss gave the arithmetic test first. Millicent finished long before everybody else and closed her copybook, while Emily Joseph was still writing and counting on her fingers. When we came out, Millicent boasted to her gang that she had got out all the sums in two twos.

In the afternoon we had dictation. Millicent wrote rapidly, never stopping to look at Miss.

The end-of-term test lasted for two days, and the next day at lunch-time Millicent gave a 'party' for her gang to celebrate her success in the exam. She had brought apples from home,

and pretty paper cups with Mickey Mouse on them. She sent messengers to Miss Aggie's parlour to buy soft drinks and sweet biscuits. They had a feast, and we hung a little distance away pretending not to notice them; but if Millicent had thrown an apple stem to us, we would have fought over it like dogs.

The bell rang and we went in. Millicent's gang were rubbing their bellies and making sounds of satisfaction, and Millicent sailed in with her head in the air.

When we had settled down, Miss said, 'Test results', and everybody shouted 'Raaaaaay!', including Joel, who was never anywhere but last.

'Where to begin?' Miss asked. 'Top or bottom?'

There was commotion for a while, some shouting 'Top! Top!', some shouting 'Bottom! Bottom!', and some even shouting 'Middle!'

Then we realised that Millicent's gang was shouting 'Top! Top!', so everybody shouted with them. Of course if Miss started from the bottom of the list, Millicent would have to wait for forty-one names before she heard hers, which was, of course, at the top.

'Okay, okay, I'll start from the top. Quiet, or I won't read them at all.'

She picked up the list, put on her glasses, and everybody looked at Millicent with admiration and then turned to look at Miss again.

'First - Emily Joseph.'

We jumped. Emily looked frightened. Nobody dared look back at Millicent. Miss was reading on. Fifth, sixth, seventh ... We were worried. She must have forgotten Millicent. Eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth ... Decidedly something was wrong.

By the time Miss had got to thirtieth we were paralysed. Nobody could move. We held our breath. Thirty-second, thirty-third ... You could have heard a pin drop. We wanted to stop Miss, to make her start over again, because she had skipped over Millicent's name.

‘Thirty-ninth – Faraz Mohammed. Fortieth – Joel Price. Forty-first – Millicent Hernandez.’

Several seconds passed before we could breathe again.

Then we heard a giggle, and we couldn’t believe it had come from our class. But it had, Vena had her hand over her mouth and was shaking with laughter. She looked at Harry. A smile spread over Harry’s face. He put his head down on the desk and giggled. Snickers came from different parts of the class. Miss was calmly putting away her list.

The giggles and snickers grew. Soon the whole class was laughing as loudly as we had laughed the day Harry fell off the bench. Miss turned her back and cleaned the blackboard.

When she had finished cleaning the blackboard, she gave us the ball and sent us outside, because, she said, we were the most unruly class in the whole school, and in the whole of Trinidad and Tobago.

We poured out onto the savannah.

‘Football!’ somebody shouted.

‘Girls against boys!’ said another.

‘Not fair!’ said a boy’s voice. ‘It’s twenty-three girls against eighteen boys.’

‘Which twenty-three?’ asked somebody. ‘It’s only twenty-two girls. Let’s go!’

It was the best football game we had ever had. Nobody won because there was so much laughing and rolling about that we forgot to keep the score. The goalpost kept falling down and Joel wet his pants.

Somebody shouted: ‘Mr Jeremy’s bull!’ and we scattered, screaming, in all directions; and when we realised there was no bull, we lay down on the grass and laughed till we were weak.

Then we tried to start the game again, but Clem grabbed the ball and ran off with it, and everybody ran after him, so he threw



it to another boy, and soon the game turned into Sway, and when it was Sway, the boys always managed to keep the ball, the girls never got hold of it ...

And it was only twenty-two girls, because Millicent was sitting in the school-yard, all by herself.

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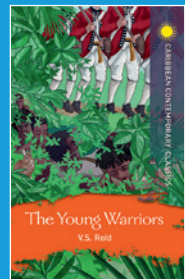
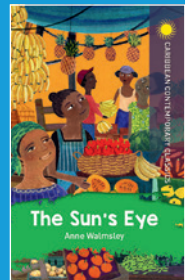
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# Over Our Way

Over our way lies a world of flame trees and hot beaches rimmed with hills, of raucous laughter in the market and shouts in the street, of bare feet running down dusty lanes and across burnt savannahs, splashing beside the boats of fishermen or inching up the ringed bark of coconut trees. A long way, full of laughing, weeping, blessing, cursing, explaining, quarrelling, accusing and lamenting.

We cannot see the beginnings or ends of our way, but we can tell some of the stories of what happens over our way: stories which we alone can tell, stories about our friendships, our lonelinesses, our games, our crimes, our sorrows and joys, our triumphs and dreams.

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