

One

SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN

In the northwest corner of the port city, on the second floor of a slum shanty, the strong winds and rain were relentless. The small boy and his mother lay beside each other, both exhausted. He was on his side with his arm across her stomach, his eyes open and staring at her. They were completely dry and his face was without notable emotion. His expression was peaceful; however, he was far from that. His previous tears had flowed in such a way, that it had washed the muck from his runny nose as he rested his head on a pillow made from an old sack. He had barely eaten any food over the last two days, save a portion of rice and fish, while his mother had not eaten in three days.

She was not long for this world and deathly ill. The exact sickness was unknown, as she had refused to call the doctors and healers, instead she slipped into a deep silence. Her condition was self-inflicted; the catalyst of her demise was caused by a broken heart. Her loss was so deep that it seemed the world had swallowed her up whole. She was sinking rapidly and had the sensation of her body being pulled down into the earth. With her last vestiges of strength, she stretched out her arms to the heavens, even to the fading light, and cried, “*Why?*”

Her husband had been everything in her life, but now he was gone. He was Chinese and employed as a *Coolie*. The Coolies were a type of indentured servant from throughout Asia; cheap labor, expendable assets, which were used along the merchant trade routes and beyond. Three months had passed since he started his journey to the island of Cuba, and the news had arrived of his death. A portion of her pain came from the constant thoughts of him. She dreamed of him, patiently awaiting his return, when in reality he had long been deceased. She was devastated. They both loved each other deeply and completely.

The moment she received word of his demise, she collapsed, in mind, body, and spirit. She wasn't previously disposed to indulge herself in spirits or herbs, but immediately immersed herself into the world of opium and alcohol. For many months, her son, Shu-Shay, sat in despair and confusion, while she became incoherent and totally neglectful in all her personal and parental responsibilities. There were other problems at hand. The landlord was owed past rent, and after confiscating all the items of value in their room, he still demanded payment. There was nothing left to give, save their sleeping mats and blankets.

Shu-Shay didn't know what else he could do, but knew crying wasn't helping, as he had already cried himself dry. He had never met any relatives, or known of their existence. The reality was that his mother had been disowned from her family and village. It was a grim repercussion of the times, dispatched by society. Her

status as a Japanese woman living with and bearing a child from a Chinese man was looked down upon, and he being a *Coolie* was a social disgrace to many Japanese and Chinese alike. These mixed marriages were generally despised by the opposing cultures, with the exception being the wealthy, whose class and station imparted them such social pardons. Even Shu-Shay was affected, as he was constantly beaten and tormented by the local youths for being, in their eyes, a “half breed.”

His mother lay beside him, burning with fever, quiet for hours. Suddenly she started breathing faster, but with shorter breaths as if she could not get enough air, moaning and grunting.

“Momma?” Shay called to her softly, in his native Cantonese. He lifted up his head, propping himself halfway up with his other arm.

“Momma! What to do, Momma?” he pleaded, hoping his mother would utter just one word, as he missed hearing her voice. The wind continued to bellow and howl as if speaking some primordial language of nature. The whole structure shook and vibrated from the power of the storm.

“Shu-Shay,” she spoke in a barely audible tone.

“Momma...Momma, what to do?” his face crinkled up, about to sob.

“Take it,” she mumbled.

“What, Momma?”

She brought her left hand slowly up to her waist, then to her stomach with great effort and difficulty. Her fingers clawed their way up her chest, toward her neck line.

Shu-Shay dropped on his knees and put his hand on top of hers while he reached under the neckline of her garment. There he found her jade amulet, which had been given to her by his father. He had forgotten that she still had it, assuming the slumlord had taken it long ago. He held it and stared at it momentarily. It was beautiful and majestic. After having it within his grasp, Shu-Shay briefly experienced a sense of fleeting hope for some inexplicable reason.

“Take,” she said with her lungs full of fluid, trying to cough with no success.

He gently removed it from his mother’s neck and put it on around his. He felt terrible, as if by accepting her last possession he was also taking her hope as well.

“Shu-Shay...so sorry,” she uttered.

He was confused and perplexed by her words. Why was she sorry? Why? Shay had a sense of unwarranted guilt, even remorse. He saw himself as puny, small and weak. He could not help his mother in any way. He could not bring food and he could not heal her. He could not even protect her, nor could he protect himself.

“I’m sorry, Momma!” he said, with water welling up in his eyes.

She was trying to speak, but he could not hear her words. He put his ear close to her mouth. He heard her faintly.

“Water,” she whispered, breathing rapidly. He looked around the room for the cup. Had the slumlord taken that, also? He wondered. He saw the wooden cup and knew he would have to leave the room to get the water, which he didn’t want to, not even for a moment.

“Yes, Momma,” he answered, and got himself up. He was dizzy as he stood up. His small frail bones were stiff from hours of lying next to her. His movements resembled that of an old frail man. He hobbled out of the room to fetch the water, and as he closed the door, he turned back to look at her. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was open. He shut the door, and walked to the top of the stairs, where he suddenly stopped. Wung, the landlord, was at the end of the hall, staring at him. How long had been standing there? What was he waiting for? Shu-Shay glanced at him for a moment and then walked down to the first floor, leaving out the back door to get water.

“We are ten miles out from mainland China, at the Port of Canton, Captain,” the First Mate, Mr. Higgins, reported.

“The storm looks to be about eight hours out sir, bearing the same and still heading inland. What are your orders Captain?”

Higgins asked as he stood at attention. They had sailed together for the past ten years, since the year 1842.

Captain Price sat back in his chair, relieving himself of his magnifying glass and manifest documents. He dug through his bushy beard with his fingers, until he reached the skin and that annoying itch, which evidently was caused by some godforsaken insect, origin and whereabouts unknown. Captain Price looked up at Higgins.

“Very well, Mr. Higgins, make all the arrangements which we discussed in great detail last evening, with one addition: inform the men that there will be no shore liberty today. We must deliver this cargo as expeditiously as possible. Again, we have six hours after setting anchor before we must depart and hope to God that we make thirty nautical miles southwest of this beast. If so, we can ride the outer rim of the storm and quicken our trip back to San Francisco.”

“Aye, aye, Captain. And will you be finding the three men to supplement the crew?”

“Yes indeed. I intend to have two of the crew accompany me, lest on my last voyage I fall victim to ill fortune at the hands of thieves and murderers; the sort of scum who seem to grow and flourish in this part of the world. Yes, make ready and send two of our most capable. Have them fitted with sidearm and blade.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Higgins, make no mistake about our predicament. We find ourselves in a dire straight and maybe in jeopardy of life, which is everything to *us*, if we do not depart this place within eight hours. If we stay at dock and try to endure this storm, the vessel will most likely suffer heavy damage, and the repairs, if even possible, will be time consuming and very costly. Perhaps even the mutiny of half the crew. We must leave on time. Whatever you need to do in order to motivate the crew to accomplish our turnaround, you must do! I will not be available for the duration due to this matter, and my usual presence will not be of assistance to you in providing the usual motivation this crew seems to require at times. In addition to the fact that port liberty will not be given, the ill temperament of some will no doubt permeate to the rest. Keep an open and watchful eye for agitators. Threaten a reduction in rations and half pay for our remaining voyage to 'Frisco at the first sign of even subtle discontent, as that should suffice.”

“Aye, aye, Captain sir. The vessel *will* be ready as you have ordered.”

“Very good, Higgins, make ready. That will be all.” As Higgins left and closed the cabin door behind him, Captain Price let out a deep breath. He seemed troubled by the predicament he found himself in, but he was optimistic that they would meet the time, providing the storm did not increase in speed. He had been a seaman since twenty-two years of age, and through attrition and

his estranged father's influence combined, he had attained the station of captain by age forty. He was now at fifty-five years of age, and ready to resign his commission.

His plan was to go back to Connecticut and settle near his childhood home. He wanted all of them to see how successful and prosperous he had become. He chuckled to himself as he thought about the chances and probabilities of a bastard son of a Jewish merchant becoming a captain. His mother was a common woman, a tailor by occupation and resided in East Haddam, Connecticut. Price did not know how they met each other, but he did know that Noah Samuel was his father. He was a wealthy Jewish merchant who was married and had two daughters. Notwithstanding those facts, he had great affection for the captain's mother, regardless of the discreet arrangements they had to make in order to continue their relationship, and despite how some folk in the community felt.

He considered them ill-willed, self-righteous bastards. They showed great amusement in illuminating any perceived flaw in one's character or circumstance. They were relentless with their gossip. It had also been rumored that Noah considered Caleb's mother to be his one and only *concubine*. His father evidently ascribed to the ancient practice indulged in by some of the biblical Jewish Patriarchs. This belief had often irritated a young Caleb, but not his mother, who evidently was endeared to Noah,

even allowing him to have the liberty of naming his newborn illegitimate son.

Caleb Price was supported financially by his father for the most part but was rarely given an audience with him. It was a well understood necessary discretion, particularly to protect his father's reputation. That being the case, his father's support and clandestine patronage was much appreciated. Ms. Price was a goddess in his eyes, howbeit a goddess that worked from dusk until dawn in order to supplement the patronage received from Noah, but more so to supplement her dignity and self-respect.

The captain reminisced about the early days at Port Hartford on the docks and his employment being arranged at the very *word* of Noah Samuels. He often reflected on the joy he experienced from being able to support his mother. His thoughts detained briefly on the second voyage he embarked on, from Savannah to West Africa. It was also funded by his father and now just a blur to him. The ordeal, the stench and horror of it all forced him to pause in thought, seemingly lost in time. He stood up slowly.

"Damn it," he whispered above a hair's breadth. He had tried many times to put the ordeal behind him, but now he was having difficulty. Captain Price needed a clear mind on this day, with no unnecessary distractions. Once again, he breathed deeply and hardened himself. He was ready for the task at hand and he encouraged himself, as he had done throughout his life. He had no illusions about the situation. He knew that he was in a struggle

for his life and that of his crew. Losing a member of his crew was simply unacceptable, that was always his conviction.

The winds had increased, and likewise the surf, as a light rain fell. Captain Price chose Manu and Tullo to accompany him, and as they each rowed together in unison they took in the view of the port. They had frequented it several times before, but never in this rough weather. There were no ships docked, which was understandable considering the conditions. Small vessels were scurrying to shore in hopes of securing their crafts on land. Tullo briefly locked eyes with Manu at one point, while seated in front of the captain. Price could discern the visual exchange between the men, which contained worry, and possibly fear.

As the craft approached the beach and was secured, Captain Price stepped out onto the beach, and into a foot of water as he made landfall. He turned and instructed the crew.

“Gentlemen, remain five paces behind me and no more. Your charge is to be alert, watchful, and ready. Let us make way,” he ordered.

“Aye, aye, Captain sir!” they chimed nearly in unison. They both were hoping that Captain Price might be delayed an hour or so during the impending negotiations, which would be enough time for them to have brief sexual relations from a prostitute, choosing from the hundreds of who resided in and around the port.

Even during a typhoon the commerce of prostitution showed no trepidation of nature's fury, as coin and sexual satisfaction would be exchanged, as it had been since the dawn of mankind. Captain Price could read their visage and knew their thoughts. At times he also indulged himself with the temporary warmth of a woman, to ward off the disparity of loneliness.

They made their way off the beach and headed toward the main thoroughfare and traveled north near the Great Statue of Buddha. There was a brothel to the left, where the local *Co Hong* resided for business and pleasure. The *Co Hong* were specially designated Chinese agents through whom all foreign trade was conducted. After the end of the First Opium War six years prior, these intermediaries transacted all port affairs. Captain Price's primary objective was the attaining of three fit men who were seaworthy, to replace the three which were lost within the past two months. One man had fallen overboard during a storm and the others had either deserted or became casualties at the port in Siam.

With the typhoon making landfall, he knew that there would be difficulties in attaining proper seamen. Who would risk joining the expedition during these conditions? He could find several drunken sailors to sign on, but he could not determine their fitness under inebriation. He did not care to hire second rate crew hands in general, and especially not on his last expedition.

The idea of transferring the vessel over to the oncoming captain in that manner did not please him. He ascribed to the ancient precept: “*Do unto the stranger as thou would have done to thee,*” which he practiced with regularity, making a conscious effort. He was determined to attain satisfactory replacements.

As they continued along, they witnessed the local folk scurrying in all directions. Everyone sensed the tension and distress in the air. The crudely made shanty structures loomed over the thoroughfare as the sky appeared to darken within a few blinks of an eye. The once steady wind gusted at regular intervals while making crude sounds as it whistled through the small alleyways. While the men pressed forward, lightning touched the earth and thunder followed.

Shu-Shay finally was able to close the door, despite the powerful winds which resisted him. He was soaked, cold, and trembling. He slowly walked up the stairs with the wooden cup in his hand, shaking, and trying to save every drop of water for his mother. He entered the room, and without closing the door, he walked directly to her. He knelt down beside her and brought the cup to her lips.

“Momma, drink,” he said almost happily, in being able to provide her some relief. He poured out a little into her open mouth. She did not swallow. He slid his hand under her head in