

The Hardest Sacrifice

By Elise Lengkeek

A cloud of steam rose up from the pot of boiling water and filled the small scullery with its oppressive heat and moisture. Tanned and careworn hands took the piles of laundry and submerged them in the steamy water. It was washing day. Mrs. Jones worked quickly, soaking and wringing out the dirty clothes of the past week. She was short and thin with a shock of dark hair and dark skin. She had a small, thin face that was almost hidden by the large stiff collar atop her heavy plaid cotton dress. Mrs. Jones had a wary look about her, almost timid, and her watery, gray eyes were often red from weeping.

But it had not always been this way. Just a few years before, Mrs. Jones had lived on a prosperous farm with her beloved husband, she minding the house and he minding the livestock. But around the birth of their first son, Mr. Jones had been killed in a tragic farming accident and all of his money and the land had been given to a rich relative. Finding no way to support her infant son, Mrs. Jones had put him in the care of an elderly neighbor. She then went to work as a maid in a distant city, so she might earn enough money to have a house and have him properly educated.

Every moment of her hard days and nights of work were filled with thoughts of her son. She longed to be with him. She had now been separated from him for six years and each day it was growing harder for her to keep on working in pain and toil and not knowing how he was.

The chiming of the dining hall clock, brought Mrs. Jones out of her moments reverie, and scuttling from her place over the steamy wet clothes, she grabbed a bonnet and basket and started out for the Market.

The market square was filled with angry buyers and sellers trying to get the best bargain. Pushing through the crowded stands, she made her way up to a man selling eggs. "I'll take a..." Mrs. Jones began, but she never finished her phrase, for above the cacophony of the market a train whistle sounded. Driven to despair and loneliness, she made a split second decision. She picked up her basket and pushed back through the masses of people leaving the egg seller speechless.

Fighting her way through the crowd, Mrs. Jones ran to the train platform and handed the ticket collector some of the money she was supposed to use at the market. She could not stay in this fatiguing ritual of hard work, loneliness and despair; she had to see her son no matter if she had enough money to support him or not. As the train rolled out of the station Mrs. Jones glanced back at the disappearing market square and felt a surge of heroic triumph run through her.

Defying her head mistress and going on an unexpected vacation from her usual drudgery was the bravest deed that Mrs. Jones was ever to do.

The village seemed exactly the same, nothing much had changed those six years. But the old haunts gave her a lonesome and nostalgic feeling—a feeling as if she did not really belong to this place any longer. Quickly taking the thought out of her mind, Mrs. Jones made her way to Martha Goodwin's cottage, the place where she had left her son. A short little man with a bushy mustache opened to her knock. "Excuse me, sir," She said, "Is this still the residence of Martha Goodwin?"

"No, ma'am," he replied, and shut the door.

After some questioning around the village, she was able to find out that Martha Goodwin had died only a month after she had left and that the child had been put in a rich family that had taken over an estate a couple miles outside of Upon reaching the estate, Mrs. Jones felt nervous and scared. How had they been treating her son for the past years? Visions of a tortured and unhappy child filled her mind with regret upon leaving him alone and motherless so long. She smoothed down her dress and unsuccessfully tried to redo her hair. She opened the gate and walked across the beautifully cut lawn.

Trying to keep down her excitement, she rang the doorbell and waited for someone to come. A maid in a starched white dress came to the door. "Who are you calling for?"

The maid asked, glancing up and down the disheveled figure in the doorway. "I would like to see Mrs. Honoria Pemberton, please," Mrs. Jones responded meekly, sensing the woman's disdain and disapproval of her appearance.

"Name, please," the maid said blandly.

"Mrs. Beth Jones," she replied quaking inwardly. After a short wait, the maid appeared again and said she could come into the parlor.

Mrs. Pemberton was sitting on a sofa reading a ladies magazine. She was a well-bred, but boisterous woman and she had a manipulative and overbearing nature that was plainly seen. She had a large mouth and inquisitive as well as scornful blue eyes—but deep down inside them, there was a hint of something loving and tender. It was hard to tell what Mrs. Pemberton's expression was, for she was decked out with lots of makeup. Her thick, possibly dyed blond hair, was done up in a large bun, and her gaudy dress and large jewels only helped to make her appearance rather oppressive.

After Mrs. Pemberton had coolly acknowledged Mrs. Jones presence, she began a tirade of questioning, "Why did you call?" Mrs. Jones felt at a loss for

words. She was invading this lady's house to take back a child that she did not know even lived here.

"I came here wondering if you could offer me work," she began nervously, hoping it would be a good temporary cover up.

"What kind of work?" Mrs. Pemberton asked suspiciously.

"Well . . .," began poor Mrs. Jones, at her wit's end.

"I don't have all day," Interrupted Honoria Pemberton impatiently. "What is your line of work? Cook, housekeeper, governess, stable boy?" she ended rudely.

Now it must be said that Mrs. Pemberton was not normally a crude woman; it was only that she had little respect or patience for the lower class.

"A governess," Mrs. Jones immediately blurted out, and then turned red bright red and said softly, "That would be in my line of work."

"I don't need a governess," Mrs. Pemberton said emphatically, "I only have a little boy." Mrs. Jones felt a surge of hope run through her; it could just be that if it was her son, Mrs. Pemberton might be happy to restore him to her.

"When did you adopt him," Mrs. Jones asked tensely.

"I wonder how you knew he was adopted," Mrs. Pemberton said suspiciously, "I adopted him a couple years ago because I was never able to have children of my own. He was born in the village nearby and the lady who was looking after him died. He was too little to know who his parents were and had no one to take care of him, so my husband and I took him in." Mrs. Pemberton's cool attitude changed for a moment into a soft one and her eyes shone—and she smiled.

As if in answer to what they had been talking about, the door to the parlor opened and a little boy came in. There was no mistaking the boy. It was Mrs. Jones' child. But taking no notice of Mrs. Jones, he ran up to Mrs. Pemberton.

"Mommy," he said, "look at this paper boat I just made."

"Mommy," A chill crept up Mrs. Jones, and her bubble of hope was burst. "He's *my* son!" Mrs. Jones inwardly despaired.

"That's wonderful, Arthur," Mrs. Pemberton said dotingly. The light shone in her eyes again and she was looking at her son in a fond, motherly way. "Arthur?" thought poor Mrs. Jones much distressed, "His name is Benjamin!"

"Who is that poor, muddy servant girl," the little boy of six said with pride and disdain, just then taking notice of Mrs. Jones.

"She came to see if she could find work," said Honoria Pemberton, just remembering that Mrs. Jones was still in the room. "Run off and play now." After giving him a kiss, he scampered off.

Mrs. Pemberton turned and spoke in her cool manner again, “I have no jobs to offer you. Good day.”

Like one hypnotized, Mrs. Jones followed her blindly to the door and after it had been shut on her she walked to the gate in a daze. It clanged shut forebodingly and left Mrs. Jones in the dusty road. She took one last look at her son playing contentedly on the lawn, and then headed back to the train station weeping all the way.

Her hopes and plans had been dashed; all his life Mrs. Jones had been working hard and tirelessly for him and now she could never have him for a son. He would never know who his true mother was, but that ignorance would never trouble him; he would only believe that Mrs. Pemberton was his mother for she was the one who had openly loved him. He would always be ignorant about Mrs. Jones—a person who had sacrificed and loved him the most. And what if she told him that she was his mother? It would only shame and disappoint him. He could not be grateful to a woman who would only reveal to him that he was of a low class and rank. And even after all the years of previous sacrifice, the one of leaving him there and not telling him she was his mother, was the hardest.

The train pulled into the station with a lonesome whistle. The London market came back into view. It was almost dark and many of the sellers had gone home for the night. Mrs. Jones picked up her large basket resignedly, and made her way through the mostly empty stands. Spotting the man still selling eggs, she hurried over. “I’ll take a dozen eggs, please.”