

**EESALLAH**

FEB. 20, 1995 Maesai, Thailand

He knew her well. She was part of bridge life. Her hair was dark black and all ratted up. If she were seventy years old someone might have called her a banshee because of her wild appearance. But she was only six years old.

For her, life consisted of running back and forth across a bridge, touching people on the hand, and tilting her head back with an upward cast plea for a few coins.

Even for her age she was really small, tiny one could say. She had a spirited flare to her style of collecting coins, that gave more character to it than mere begging.

Her mother was usually not far off, a tall, very thin woman who always wore a dark brown jacket that was as thin as she was. Sometimes she could be seen near the river's edge washing out clothes.

Where she lived he did not know, but as with most all of the begging children, opium was involved. Either the father smoked it or both the parents smoked it. Some women who carried an older child on their back might sometimes give opium to the child in some form, the child sleeping most of the time.

The little girl would come and talk to him many times when he sat near the bridge, watching all the people coming and going. Her name was Eesallah, which was a charming name for such a charming child.

He felt it unfortunate that she couldn't go to school. But that was the least of it when you consider the future such a child will have. The families depended on the children to beg and they would be punished if they didn't, which was the stark reality of it. Without someone addressing the behavior of the unprofitable parents there was no hope for the children. And unless someone addressed the exploitive nature of the overall environment in which they lived no progress could be made either. In their world there were far more predators than the few who could save them when they came into the jaws of peril.

He had known most of the children of the bridge for a long time. He did what he could for them, but really what they needed was security. A half day school and fun things to do would be a start, the chance to be children instead of living the hardening life of beggars.

He didn't have the money to set up and maintain a school so he contented himself to be their friend and always listened to their elated chatter and arguments about a one baht coin.

Eesallah, despite being so tiny, managed to hold her own, and due to her flare even seemed to be respected by the bigger beggars. Often the child who was smaller for their years became a kind of mascot for the older and bigger children. He had seen this happen before and suspected that it might be the case here once again.

Eesallah would chatter at him for a while and then flit off across the bridge like a black butterfly, with golden cat's eyes, lighting up the dark. Her Burmese sequined base ball cap, set rakishly to one side, reminded him of an old sarcastic tobacco spitting ranch hand. He found it amusing that in the personality of a child one could often see the traits, developed over many years, of older people who he knew.

Almost all of the beggar children, same as other village children, had head lice. Between hopping and dancing across the bridge, as she would often do, Eesallah might stop and shove both hands into her hair, scratching her head and pushing the hat up on a stack of black tangled hair as she did so. He wished he could find some remedy for head lice, available from the jungle which these families could use without cost. They could hardly afford the pricey shampoo from the stores.

When Eesallah got tired of the bridge she walked down below it for some shade. Maybe she marched off down the street by herself or with another small child, and began begging near the big hotel.

One could try and throw a lot of reasons at it but the chief contrast he saw here was strictly a matter of the rich and the poor.

If he took any of these beggar children and added enough money to the equation they would come out groomed, well clothed, well fed and healthy. With so many things working against their future what they really needed was intervention to break the cycle and give them enough respi

te to learn of other possibilities in life. One could look for all the possible causes they could and they would still come up with the need to intervene, to set lives on a new track, going in a new direction. This he thought to himself was the meaning of redemption.

At the end of a long day, eating bits of food and bits of candy she had begged off the passing folks, Eesallah handed her coins dutifully over to her mother for the last time and headed back across the bridge to sleep in some dirty corner of a hut, the likes of which he had seen many times before.

In his mind, most sad scenes such as these were the result of the inequitable distribution of wealth, many people having far more than they needed, without seeing the connection which that had to those who had little or nothing. Sure, reasons could be found, events of human frailty, which caused these people to be poor, but wealth begets wealth and poverty begets poverty.