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# 1

## The Mine

1895-1897, India

She was five years old, and she wanted her mother. Light-skinned and pretty, with a mop of black curly hair, she was a high-caste child living in the temple women's house next door to the powerful bastion whose heavy carved door was the gate to hell for hundreds of little ones inside. She had enormous, perfectly round eyes like a deep-water pearl, and so she was called Pearleyes.

The temple was in a village called Perungulam, dedicated to the worship of the god Perumal. Shut away behind closed doors, Pearleyes was given picture books to look at, scenes of the vileness and depravity, and when she pushed them away the temple woman beat her soft shoulders with a stick.

But she was only five years old, and she wanted to go home to Tuticorin, twenty miles away. Watching her chance, she ran out into the street one day when the door was accidentally left open by a careless servant, but the temple woman was swiftly beside her. "*Aiyo!* Ungrateful one! Should a servant of the gods run about in the streets?"

And because it was not the first time she had disobeyed, she was dragged into the courtyard, where the woman heated an iron rod in the flame and branded her on the back of both hands.

Pearleyes lay on her mat that night, and even though another temple woman rubbed some oil on

the burns, she cried. But her cry was only one in many thousands, for this was India.

India, turning the corner into the twentieth century, was little different from India through almost five thousand years of history. On the surface were colorful layers of tapestry but underneath—the mud floor and muck and dark corners and crawling things. To a new arrival, India was hot, dry air that parched the throat, filling the mouth with dust that could neither be swallowed nor coughed up.

India was a mosaic of scenes. Early morning with the sun's rays splayed out, scintillating over the marketplace, where streets teemed with noisome life, stinking of garbage, ginger, goat urine, the vendors' smoky food, incense, sweat, hot curry. A bewitchment of color. Lavish, inflammatory rug colors were set against a background of dullest squalor. Shopkeepers spilled out wares into the streets: Watery sweets speckled with flies. Ivory carvings. Leather goods and brassware. Large, practical jugs in red and blue and earth colors, mounded to stack one atop the other. Turbans purpural. Rainbowed saris hung on racks, pretty as pink tinsel. Filigreed jewelry, glass bangles, and loops of silver; golden ornaments poured out without measure on a merchant's table. Amber, the size of knuckles, strung on thong. Carnelian. Jade drops, like liquid grass.

A snake charmer with a turban as huge as last week's laundry, offering to charm poisonous snakes out of old walls, sat cross-legged before a cobra, its hood spread, the creature rising and swaying from side to side, eyes following the piping flute of its owner.

Tired, bony cows jostled against people in the streets, their eyes stupid and full of hopeless resignation. A fungus-spread of wasted beggar bodies—bodies—bodies—skeletal bodies as far as eye could see. A vast, open-air morgue.

Beyond the marketplace sprawled the factories making cotton goods, built by the British East India Company, who also traded in indigo and spices. Hundreds of thousands of Indians lived on the company land.

In the countryside and villages, the leitmotiv of early morning in India was the pungent smell of burning fuel cakes and blue smoke. And the women squatting with spread-apart knees, patting the cow dung into wagon-wheel-sized slabs, storing them in *batooras*, eye-high rooms of baked clay.

In the south were palm trees and propagated rice cultivation—slips of plants pegged down for firm growth. Short, dark little people with curly hair, descendants of ancient Dravidians, threshed grain with bullocks or plowed with a wood stick near fields of sugar cane, flocks of goats, hawks overhead.

Millions of Untouchables—the outcastes—who “were all horrible sinners in eons past, deserving now neither help nor sympathy while they work out their curse,” any Indian would explain.

India's temples, carved from solid rock, served as sermons in stone for 92 percent of the population who were illiterate, keeping alive the deeds (and misdeeds) of the holy ones—thirty million or so—as centuries flowed over them. Outwardly imposing and stolid with an ugly barbaric beauty, some of them, like the tower of a temple in Madras, depicted eight hundred life-like figures,

astonishing the beholder with its workmanship.

A Brahmin pathologist, educated in European universities, gave his opinion of the temples: "As evil as the ooze of the riverbanks. I myself went within them to the point where one is obliged to take off one's shoes, because of sanctity. Beyond lay the shrines, rising out of the mud, decaying food, and human filth. I would not walk in it. I said, No! But hundreds of thousands do take off their shoes, walk in it, worship, walk out, and put their shoes upon their unwashed feet. And I, a Hindu and a doctor, must bear witness to that!"

There was civilization and Hinduism in India over four thousand years ago. The Vedic writings of religious ceremonies and sacrifices are as old as the book of Genesis. At the turn of the century, India still had no common language. Languages and dialects numbered more than 850.

India has always been a country of villages, 500,000 of them. Over 250 million people, at the time, lived in villages or cities. Seventy percent of the people were farmers.

Madras was a large, very old seaport on the east coast of India in the Bay of Bengal, founded in 1639 by the East India Company. In November 1895, a discouraged, confused, and ill young Irish woman, Amy Carmichael, arrived just in time for the coolness of the rainy season, when water poured as if from sluices from a gray, low-bellied sky. Steamers and brigs, fishing boats and dhows clogged the harbor.

She was twenty-eight years old. Behind her lay a definite call to the mission field—but also a year's term of service in Japan, a breakdown, a holiday in China, a worsening of her condition, a trial at

Ceylon, then by Christmas 1894 all the way back to England right where she had started from.

The Christian Literature Society was in Madras, and Amy stayed there three weeks getting rested up with a missionary family. She then traveled to Bangalore, where a nurse friend had written that the climate and surroundings were "delightful" On the way she picked up *dengue*, bone-break fever, appropriately named because of the aches and pains it brought and its side effect, depression.

"You look fresh as a daisy!" exclaimed the friend who met her, but Amy's temperature was 105° and in her own words she felt "wormy."

She knew very little of India and certainly nothing of children like Pearleyes. No one knew. The first thing she would learn—and quickly—as the Reverend Thomas Walker predicted, was that India was Satan's chosen battleground.

Amy was put to bed, dosed, cozied, and a week later felt well enough to stand on her feet again. She scrutinized herself in the bedroom mirror. A longish, oval face with a proper, straight British nose, dark wavy hair swept up behind her ears in a coil, eyes—not Irish blue like her mother's—but dark brown. Charcoal strokes for eyebrows. A controlled, rather prim mouth with all the laughter bottled up in her eyes. She wore a high-necked, long-sleeved starched dress as did the other women.

"It has been uphill work even to live," confided a veteran missionary. "The devil fights against every ray of light."

His wife added a plaintive sigh. "I feel of no use here."

There are few languages more difficult to learn

than Tamil, but Amy pitched in, and the long hours passed in language study. The sticky warmth crawled over her like a web, hugging her close, securing her uncomfortably in a mesh of heat. Her sweaty dress clung fast to her, stuck to her wet skin, and began to itch. Hours pulled out like hot, stretched taffy into weeks, months. The perplexities of Tamil conjugation knotted her brain.

Thoughts she did not like to admit as her own materialized before her: "I am too sensitive for this type of work—the weather is too wearing on me."

And one day, as she leaned her aching head on her sweaty palm: "How much more you might have done for God at home!" She recognized *that* remark as "the insinuating hiss of the enemy."

She felt tempted to laziness and remembered the Indian proverb she had translated in one of her lessons: "It is better to sit than to walk, to lie down than to sit, to sleep than to wake, and death is the best of all." Too much introspection made her morbid. She had headaches and neuralgia.

Mosquitoes and flies persisted in their friendliness. Sometimes she indulged in self-pity and injured pride. After all, she had worked for over a year in Japan, preaching through an interpreter, saw souls saved and men delivered from demons after she prayed.

The Christian church in Bangalore was very active. Active in the sense that the Christians attended church, received the sacraments, and paid their dues. Indians did love meetings! Meetings of any kind! They obligingly flocked to meetings that lasted for hours, then returned home—unchanged. The fact that there had not been one convert in a year's time did not seem to bother the Christians.

It bothered Amy. She suffered through "social times" with the other missionaries where the ladies embroidered and listened to a lecture being read. When the church pillars did take time for recreation, they associated only with each other, never including Indians in the friendship.

She discovered to her horror that unconverted Muslims and Hindus were hired to teach in the mission's school, people who could not possibly be living, daily examples of Christianity.

Depression, like a black hand, dragged her down. But, worst of all, as she described it, "The temptation to ambition—then the spiritual perishes."

One day, after letters from home arrived, Amy clutched them to her breast and hesitated on the threshold of the missionary's sitting room, longing to share them with someone. Suddenly she turned as the quick tears filled her eyes, ran to her room, locked the door, and fell on her knees by her bed, overpowered with loneliness. "How can I go on—how can I stand it all the way to the end?" She wept before the Lord.

And chilling words spoken before, which had completely astonished her, rose up again: "You don't mean to say that you think all missionaries love one another?"

A verse committed to memory, chosen by the Holy Spirit, floated uppermost among the many verses: "He that trusteth in Me shall never be desolate."

"Make Him your chief Friend and Lover," she advised a fellow worker long after that, when the Dohnavur Fellowship was a growing family.

From that day on, she shut herself in her room whenever letters came, spread them out on the



table, and read them aloud to the Lord. A deeper walk and talk with the living Savior began that day, and there was no separation between them to the very end.

Even after the language is learned, she discovered, and one stands alone in a city or town, a black wave of depression can sweep up, fierce temptations call, fiery darts fall on the naked soul, or—something worse—a missionary living in the pleasantness of nominal Christianity can slide back into slack content.

This was her introduction to the mission field. Amy felt like a fish out of water in Bangalore. She was fun-loving, and there were personality clashes with the other missionaries. She shocked them by asking permission to go and live with a native family in a mud hut to learn the idiom of Tamil properly.

One afternoon, bored and brain-weary from an entire day of language study, Amy ran outdoors for a romp on her pony. She spied the dignified Resident's carriage coming up the long hill to his home, the man who represented the Queen in India seated in the back. She spurred her pony and galloped for all she was worth, hair flying in the wind, skirt ruffled up dreadfully, and raced the carriage up the hill. There! She pulled up sharp—the winner!

Her brain felt so much lighter as she trotted home, she felt relaxed and almost cheerful. But the missionaries had seen. She was in disgrace.

One older, domineering saint of God took her to task with some sharp, cutting, most unfair words. Amy's hot Irish temper flared, but Someone laid a hand of control on her. "See in it a chance to die," an inner Voice said.

The words spelled release for her old nature and an opening up of spiritual progress for herself. She bore the reprimand quietly, without answering back.

Shortly after that it was suggested to her that she would better learn Tamil farther south where it was the only language spoken. She went to live with the Reverend Thomas Walker and his wife in Tinnevelly District. ("Tinnevelly" was made up of three Tamil words: religion, food, protection.) The verse Amy read early that morning was, "My Presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest."

Walker *Iyer* ("teacher") was a noted Tamil scholar, known for his "devastating truthfulness." The bungalow was in the village of Palamcottah on a sandy plain with palm trees all around. Tinnevelly was bounded on the west by mountains and on the east by sea. Some of the countryside was wild and lonely, filled with robbers waiting to steal the jewels from women travelers. There was no lack of tigers, snakes, poisonous spiders.

Tinnevelly District, along with the Kingdom of Travancore, filled the southern tip of India. Through the middle sprawled the Western Ghats, a mountain range, running clear down into the India Ocean.

Each village and town had its temple with high carved towers surrounded by a high wall. In this small district alone were three thousand temples. No Christian had ever entered the center shrine of the place where the god dwelt.

The religion told of gods who came to this world to destroy evil, but in doing this they also destroyed the evildoers. They never heard of a God who had come to destroy sin and save the sinner.

Seven months later, Amy and the Walkers moved about three miles north to an old mission house in the small town of Pannaivilai. Amy, along with the pastor's daughter and a handful of Indian converts, traveled in and around the area as evangelists. The Indians dubbed them the "Starry Cluster," for they recognized the sincerity and light that shone forth.

The members of the band had no salary but looked to God to supply needs. Their attitude was, "How much can I do without, that I may have more to give?"

Starting out early in the morning before the heat of afternoon could reach them, Amy and her sisters in Christ crawled inside a *bandy*, a sort of covered wagon pulled by two oxen with yokes laid across their shoulders, attached to the cart. The *bandy* had wooden wheels, wooden axles and pins, which squeaked and rattled alarmingly, jolting them from side to side like sacks of rice. Traveling at the rate of three miles an hour, they reached a village and walked through the dirt roads trying to strike up conversation.

Amy's first appearance in a long white dress and wide straw hat caused a stir.

A startled child first saw her and shrieked, "Oh, come and see! A giant white man is here! Oh, what a terrible sight! Run, everyone!"

"It's not a white man—it wears a dress."

"It *is* a man with a lady's hat on!"

Then, as their fear subsided, with giggles and much poking and wriggling, they crowded around the monstrosity.

"Are you married?"

"Where is your family? Why have you left them to come here?"

"How much are you paid for doing this work?"

"Do you eat curry and rice as we do?"

It dawned upon Amy how sensible it would be to wear native dress, and at the earliest opportunity she purchased a sari and straw sandals.

The village homes were one-room huts, sometimes two, with no furniture but sleeping mats and a chest for storing grain. Roofs were mud tile or thatched with long branches of palm trees, walls of bamboo and mud, a floor either bare earth or dried cow dung.

Bathing and family laundry were done in the village tank, in a stream, or in a well. Huts were close together, forming narrow-landed openings. Surrounding the village were fields producing rice, wheat, peas, or beans. Since labor was considered degradation, only the very necessary type of work was performed.

Men wore dhotis, a loin cloth wound about the waist and passed between the legs to form loose trousers, one end sometimes thrown up over a shoulder. Women wore the graceful sari. The jewelry on ankles, wrists, chest, arms, ears, and fingers proclaimed the wealth and position of the family.

Women used to generations of seclusion and degradation, hidden away in the *ander*, an inner room with no windows, were slow to respond to the evangelists. "I used to feel like a cat on top of a wall," Amy said, so necessary was it to be careful and circumspect.

Amy caught glimpses of the slow turn of spinning wheels in the homes and the tedious work at handlooms as thread was woven into fine cloth of cotton or silk, forming carpets, rugs, shawls.

In the Christian church at Pannaivilai was an Indian deacon whose son had married a lovely

nineteen-year-old girl, Ponnammal. When the son died suddenly, the girl widow was considered the cause of the calamity, such was the superstition still binding the minds of Christian in-laws. Ponnammal, who lived with them, was not allowed to comb her hair or wash, and only dirty clothes were suitable attire for a widow. She was made the household drudge. One night, in her unhappiness, she stole out of the house and stood looking down into the depths of the garden well. How easy it would be to let herself slip down into the cool water and end forever her harsh life. Something—Someone—prevented it, and she quietly went back to bed, wondering.

Her in-laws allowed her to attend church, for the sake of appearance only, and Ponnammal heard preaching that called to her heart. She gave it to the One who could heal and forgive and put some meaning into her life.

By a miracle, she was permitted to leave the home of her in-laws—of what use anyhow was such a one who caused the death of their son due to her sins in a previous reincarnation?—and she joined Amy in her work with the Starry Cluster.

Those two happy years intinerating were jewels, as Amy said, jewels that no time could dim. Of the other, smaller, more helpless jewels, owned by the temple, Amy knew nothing as yet.

India was a land of nature's jewels. Down in the crust of the earth, toward the region of fire and molten rock, descending into hell, the worker in a mine faced darkness, depth, danger, depression, death, in order to bring to the light silver from its vein, chunks of gold, gemstones.

"Satisfied—South India," Amy wrote in her Bi-

ble at this time. Her wanderings were over. India was the mine God had directed her to. Every soul was precious, but she would discover that the tiniest, most fragile jewels were those most deeply buried.