

Compassion: “The Child-Catching Missie Ammal”
Adapted from *Hero Tales, Volume I*, by Dave and Neta Jackson

When Amy Carmichael went to India in 1895, she had no idea she would never go home. She founded Dohnavur (doh-nah-voor) Fellowship to provide a home for dozens of little girls and boys.

As I and the Starry Cluster went from village to village preaching the Gospel, I noticed small girls who seemed to live in the Hindu temples. They were beautifully dressed and very graceful. “Who are these children?” I wanted to know.

“Those are the temple children,” Ponnamal told me sadly. “They are married to the gods.”

I was shocked. How could anyone give or sell their child to the temple? Gradually I learned why. If parents were not able to arrange a good marriage (which, in India, was done at an early age), their child was “married to the gods” to avoid disgrace. Or a widow might sell her child to the temple to get much-needed money. Or maybe it was to fulfill a religious vow or promise. Whatever the reason, I knew it was a terrible life for a child.

I decided to do something about it. Sometimes I tried to get the children away from the temples. But the temple children were watched night and day.

“Watch out,” the children were told, “or you will be captured by that child-catching Missie Ammal.” (Ammal means “mother” in Tamil.)

On March 6, 1901, I and the Starry Cluster returned late at night to our village of Pannaivilai after many months on the road. The next morning as I relaxed on the porch sipping my tea, a neighbor woman appeared with a young girl she had found the night before.

The child crawled right into my lap. “Are you the child-catching Missie Ammal?” the little girl asked. “My name is Preena, and I want to stay with you—always!”

Gradually Preena told her story. Her mother had “married her to the gods,” but she was always scared. Once she ran away and went home to her mother. But her mother took her right back to the temple, and her hands had been branded with a hot iron for running away. She was watched closely.

Still seven-year-old Preena wanted to run away. How she slipped past the temple guards on March 6, no one knows. (*An angel must have led her out of her prison, I thought, just like the apostle Peter.*) If Preena had escaped a few days earlier, I would not have been home. And if the neighbors had found the girl earlier in the day, she would have been taken back to the temple already. Only God could have planned it so well.

Now I was sure God had sent Preena to me to take care of. *But, I thought, how can I take care of a small girl while traveling from village to village preaching about Jesus Christ?*

God soon gave me an answer. When more temple children came to me for protection, I realized that I and the Starry Cluster needed to quit traveling and make a home for them. I called the home Dohnavur Fellowship.

An ancient Indian proverb says, “Children tie the feet of the mother”—meaning a mother is not free to come and go as she pleases. Her duty is first of all to her children. I let my feet be “tied” because I had compassion on the temple children. I didn’t just feel sorry for them. I let my compassion for them change my life.

Compassion is sympathy for another person that goes beyond just feeling sorry and makes you take action.