

Into the Dark

'I can't see! It's dark everywhere. What place is this? Where am I?' Jeya tried to peer about her. Her mouth felt dry. She knew she must have been asleep for a long time as she now felt very hungry and thirsty. As her eyes got used to the dark she could make out large stone pillars. Strange, unearthly shapes reared up out of the gloom. Between the pillars was a huge stone body. She shivered when she saw its face. The stern, angry features were decorated with red and black markings. This, she knew, was Kali, the goddess of death and destruction.

The little girl trembled. She realised that she must be in a temple. She tried to move, but her legs were tied together. The bars of her cage were thick and strong. She tried to remember what she had heard the priest say to her mother.

'Your little girl will be happy with us. She will have plenty of food. We will teach her to dance before our gods. She will gain heaven for all your family by pleasing the gods.'

'I'm not sure about this now. When I agreed the other day I wasn't thinking. My Jeya is so young and tiny.' Her mother sounded worried and afraid. The priest's narrow eyes flickered with anger as she said this.

‘But I have brought the money with me. Your other children will have a better home and good food. How can a poor widow like you give three children all that? Now don’t argue any more. We have an agreement!’

Jeya could see the tears in her mother’s eyes. She heard again the clinking sound as money was handed over. A last hug from her mother and she was gone. The priest lifted the four-year-old he had bought onto his cart and they left her home. On the journey he gave her something to drink, sweet and sticky. After that she felt very drowsy and must have fallen asleep.

‘Wake up, girl! I’ve come to fetch you.’ Piercing eyes were staring in at Jeya. A small, thin woman had stepped forward in front of the cage. She was very old and her dark-brown skin was wrinkled and leathery.

She lifted a latch outside and put her hands in to untie the cloth bands around Jeya’s legs. ‘Come with me,’ she ordered. ‘You will spend your first few months with me at my home and find out your temple duties.’

Her hut was dirty and smelly. She gave the little girl two meals a day and began making her learn by heart the long chants to say to the gods. If Jeya made a mistake the old woman slapped her hard. ‘How is my mother? Is my little brother well again?’ she asked the woman. ‘Forget all about them. Your life is here now. You must work hard or the priest will beat you.’ Jeya sobbed herself to sleep every night.

Every afternoon the woman sent her to fetch water from the river while she had a good long nap. On her

sixth day there Jeya was down at the river on her own. She sat on the riverbank a little longer than usual. The water-pot was heavy and she had already made three long trips with it.

‘You look tired, little one. Someone who loves you has told me that you have been sold to the priest. I can take you away from here to a safe place.’ The voice was soft and friendly. Jeya looked up into a smiling face. The woman’s dark-brown eyes gazing down at her made her look so kind. ‘We can travel in the bullock-cart over there,’ she said.

Jeya looked to where she pointed and saw an older woman and a driver waiting near the trees. No more chanting, or beatings, or working in that frightening temple. ‘Oh, yes please,’ she replied. The woman in the sari picked her up and carried her over to the cart.

After travelling for several hours they arrived at a low building behind a bungalow. Jeya was so tired she hardly took in her new surroundings. The older woman now spoke. ‘Amy, you put her to bed and I will fetch a cup of milk for her.’ Jeya was carried to a bedroom, undressed and placed in a cot by the same woman who had spoken to her by the river.

Suddenly, all Jeya’s fears returned and she cried out, ‘You won’t beat me, will you? I’ll be good and work hard for you!’ To her surprise she felt the woman’s arms around her and a gentle voice said, ‘You will not be made to work hard here. Tonight you will sleep in my room. You will have brothers and sisters to play

with in the garden tomorrow. Our God is love. No one will hurt you here.'

Although the woman's eyes were brown, Jeya could now see that she did not have brown skin. 'Why have you come here? What is your name? Are you from a village over the mountains?' Jeya asked her. At this the woman laughed and said, 'My name is Amy Carmichael, but you can call me Amma. My home is over the mountains and over the sea, too. Big ships sailed across stormy waters to bring me to this place. I come from a country called Great Britain. Now you close your eyes and I will introduce you to your new friends in the morning.'

Jeya felt less afraid now. Her bed was soft and the milk had been so good. She began to feel sleepy. 'Over the sea, that sounds a long way away,' she thought, 'I wonder what the sea is? Is it safe? Perhaps it is dangerous? But I don't have to worry about things like that. I know that this lady is going to look after me. I've never felt so safe before – I'm going to like it here.' And the little girl closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.