

A
Chance
to Die



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Preface

To Amy Carmichael I owe what C.S. Lewis said he owed to George MacDonald: as great a debt as one can owe another.

I cannot pay it. But it is my hope that this biography will introduce its subject to a generation which has not had the privilege that was mine. I “met” her when I was fourteen. Mrs. P. W. Du-Bose, headmistress of a small boarding school in Florida, used to quote often in school vespers from Carmichael books. I was captivated, and told her so. She lent me the books.

Dohnavur became a familiar place. I knew its bungalows, its paths, its people; I breathed its air. Amy Carmichael became for me what some now call a role model. She was far more than that. She was my first spiritual mother. She showed me the shape of godliness. For a time, I suppose, I thought she must have been perfect, and that was good enough for me. As I grew up I knew she could not have been perfect, and that was better, for it meant that I might possibly walk in her footprints. If we demand perfect models we will have, except for the Son of Man Himself, none at all.

The first of her books that I read was, I think, *If*, which became her bestseller. It was not written for teenagers, but for seasoned Christians with the solemn charge of caring for the soul of others. It was from the pages of this thin blue book that I, a teenager, began to understand the great message of the Cross, of what the author called “Calvary love.” I saw that the chance to die, to be crucified with Christ, was not a morbid thing, but the very gateway to Life. I was drawn – slowly, fitfully (my response was fitful), but inexorably.

In a far more secular and self-preoccupied time Amy Carmichael’s vision of the unseen and her ardent effort to dwell in its light, making any sacrifice for its sake, seems hardly believable, let alone worth trying to imitate. Will we be put off by her awesome discipline, her steadfastness, or perhaps by the cultural shift or the difference in vocabulary (saturated as it was by the English of the King James Bible and the mystics of centuries ago)? She spoke often of the “country whose forces move unseen among us.” That country is our country. We are its citizens as she was, if we call ourselves Christians. If its forces moved in Dohnavur they move unabated here, too, where we live. If we are unaware, perhaps we have not listened, have not taken time to observe. Have we been deafened by noise, some of the worst of which passes for music? Has our vision, spiritual as well as physical, perhaps been impaired by the glittering images of the ubiquitous screen?

In spite of much that militates against quietness there are people who still read books. They are the people who keep me going. I write especially for those who bring to their reading a mind not hidebound by the sensibilities of our own time, but prepared to contemplate the Eternally Relevant; to seek

in this book specifically the truth and the hidden meaning of a single life.

We read biographies to get out of ourselves and into another's skin, to understand the convulsive drama that shapes, motivates, and issues from that other life. Our current vocabulary includes such terms as identify, role models, self-image, self-actualization, liberation, upward mobility, and fulfilment, worries that never crossed Amy Carmichael's mind. How shall we, accustomed to popular seminars on rights and how to feel comfortable, receive and transmit a faith that prized what the world despises (the Cross) and despised what the world prizes (all that dims the Cross)?

The Christian life comes down to two simple things: trust and obedience. What does that mean, exactly? We could hold a seminar and talk about it. Visual aids are better. Look at a life. Amy Carmichael set her face toward that other country. Her education, experience, and environment were incidentals, a mere framework within which she lived for eighty-three years, loved, feared, trusted, suffered, celebrated, failed, triumphed, and died. Through all the lights, poses, moods, and disguises we discern the common human elements that make up all of our lives.

I offer the testament of one whose loyal answering of her Lord's *Come follow* has made an incalculable difference to me. May it make a difference to my readers.

Elisabeth Elliot

Magnolia, Massachusetts



Chapter 1

Tide pools, pink powder, and prayers

She managed to stuff her two little brothers up through the skylight and then squeezed herself onto the slate roof. Glorious freedom. They stood up triumphant in the fresh wind that swept across the Irish Sea. The water was blue today, which to the girl (perhaps seven or eight years old) meant that it was happy. On some days it was green and angry, on others grey and anxious. Over the rooftops of the village they could see the stony beach and, far off across the water, the great rock, called Ailsa Craig, and two rounded hills, the Paps of Jura. Now for the rest of the adventure. Gleefully the three children slid down the slates and paraded triumphantly around the lead gutters – until they saw, gazing up at them, the astonished faces of their parents.

The girl was Amy Beatrice Carmichael, great-great-granddaughter of one Jane Dalziel. It was said that King

Kenneth II of Scotland (A.D. 971–995) had offered a reward to any of his subjects who would dare to remove from the gallows the body of the king's friend and kinsman who had been hanged. One stepped forth and said in Gaelic, "Dal ziel," *I dare*. So Dalziel became his name. That spirit was not much diluted in the child on the roof.

The parents on the ground were David Carmichael, descendant of Scottish Covenanters, and Catherine Jane Filson, descendant of Dalziel. Years later Amy found spiritual significance in this union, as she found spiritual significance in almost everything. Because her mother's ancestors were friendly with certain persecutors of the Covenanters, it was as though persecutor and persecuted were at last united. "So you see," she wrote, "after all, cruelty and wrong are not the greatest forces in the world. There is nothing eternal in them. Only love is eternal."

Amy Carmichael was born December 16, 1867 in the grey stone house, one of three large houses in the village of Millisle on the north coast of Ireland. Below the Carmichael house, close by the seashore to this day, stands a row of old stone cottages with low doors, thick walls, and small-paned windows. In the street that runs along by those cottages are the water pumps and the iron rings set into the stones to which horses were tied. It is not hard for a visitor in the late twentieth century to imagine a little girl, wrapped in a woollen shawl, trying to hurry along that street with her little brother while carrying a pot of soup sent by their mother for one of the poor cottagers.

The rocky beach was her favourite playground, where she would lie prone beside its tide pools and gaze and gaze. There were live things in those pools, things which held endless

fascination for the child. Her powers of observation were exquisite, her sympathy boundless – even, as we shall see later, for creatures the rest of the world thinks worthy of nothing but death.

The house was surrounded by a garden where there were roses, ivy, apple trees, yellow whins, and heartsease. There was a high wall with a large gate opening onto the principal street of the village. Not far away stand today the ruins of an old flour mill, its windows bricked up, the roof disintegrating. On the seashore can be seen what is left of the quay where grain was unloaded. Amy's great-grandfather had leased the mill a hundred years before she was born, and her father and Uncle William, whose house was just down the road, managed it together. Coming from the lowlands of Scotland, the family joined the Presbyterian Church built by the Anti-Burgher Seceders, a group who, because of the doctrinal disagreements, had separated themselves from the Church of Scotland. Convinced of their obligation to live for the good of others, the two brothers supported the church with their generous tithes, bought a pony carriage for the minister, and were benefactors of the Millisle National School which was used not only for the three R's but for Sunday school and evangelistic services.

The love which formed the climate of the Carmichael home was a sinewy one, without the least trace of sentimentality, holding not only the conviction of her father's side of the family, and the courage of her mother's, but the toughness of Irish Presbyterians, the ruggedness bred by winters on that cold sea, and no-nonsense principles of child-rearing.

There was no question in the minds of the Carmichael children as to what was expected of them. Black was black. White was white. Their parents' word could be

trusted absolutely, and when it was not obeyed there were consequences. Five kinds of punishment were used: being stood in a corner with face to the wall, forbidden to go out to play, slapped, “pandied,” and (worst of all) given Gregory powder. A pandy was a stroke with a thin flat ebony ruler. The child was required to stand still, to hold out his hand at once and not pull it away, to make no fuss, and finally to say politely, “Thank you, Mother.” He knew that the worst was coming when he found a tray set up in the dining room with a pitcher of hot water, a small pitcher of cold milk, a teacup, a teaspoon, and a bottle of pink powder. It was too late for apologies. The mother mixed the potion, the child received it, thanked her for it, and drank it down.

One day Amy and two of her brothers were swinging on the garden gate when an idea struck her. They had been told that the seeds of the nearby laburnum tree were poisonous. “Let’s count how many we can eat before we die!” said Amy. It was not long before they began to feel uncomfortable, and wondered what would happen next. Gregory, of course, was what happened next, and they were sent to bed to meditate on their sins. Some notion of the mother’s strong determination can be gathered from Amy’s report of one occasion when she cried, “Oh, Mother, I’ve such a pain!” The calm reply, “Have you, dear? I hope it will do you good.” “But Mother, I can’t bear it! It’s a *dreadful* pain.” “Is it, dear? I’m afraid you will have to bear it.”

A nursemaid attempted to frighten the children out of their habit of swallowing plum stones by telling them that a plum tree would grow out of their heads for each stone they swallowed. Amy was charmed by the idea of having an orchard of her very own, within such easy access. Deciding that twelve

trees would provide her with plenty of plums to eat and to give away, she gulped down twelve stones.

When told how exceedingly naughty she was, Amy used to think, "If only you knew how much naughtier I could be, you wouldn't think I'm naughty at all."

The seven children – Amy, Norman, Ernest, Eva, Ethel, Walter, and Alfred – were called daily to family prayers by the sound of a bell. Probably the servants also were required to attend. Amy remembered the sound of her father's voice reading the Scripture, a "solemn sound, like the rise and fall of the waves on the shore." Her ear was trained in this way, from those earliest years when a child's powers of memorization by hearing are nearly miraculous. For the rest of her life the majestic cadences of the Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible shaped her thinking and every phrase she wrote. A child, when apparently distracted, learns far more than adults dream he can learn. Amy did not by any means always attend perfectly to the reading. Once she found a mouse drowning in a pail of water just at the moment when the prayer bell rang. She fished it out, hid it in her pinafore, took her place at prayers, and hoped it would not squeak. It did.

Whenever there was a meeting at the little whitewashed church in Balleycopeland, the Carmichael family was there. Amy envied the farmers' children, whose station in life was clearly very different from hers. The farmers' wives, on their part, may have pitied the mill owner's children, and sometimes offered them peppermints as they went into church. They were instructed to refuse politely – to smile and say, "Thank you very much, but my mother would rather I didn't." It was one thing to go to church with village folk. It was something else to do all the things village folk did. Their children snuggled down

during the long service (never less than two hours) and sucked on pink and white lozenges. The smell reached the Carmichael pew – “but such solace was denied us.”

Only psalms were permitted to be sung on Sundays, but hymns might be used in the Wednesday evening prayer meetings. Once when the theme of the prayer meeting was “Our Departure from this World,” Amy amused herself by counting up all the various things hymn writers said you were supposed to do at the precise moment of departure. How a dying person could manage them all she was at a loss to know, but was pleased with the prospect of shouting, “while passing through the air, ‘Farewell, farewell, sweet hour of prayer!’” What else could it mean but that very prayer meeting?

Amy had an extreme sensitivity to others’ pain. When her mother told her the story of Calvary for the first time, she rushed out into the garden to try to forget “thoughts too dreadful to be borne, for how could anybody hurt another so, especially one who was so good? And there on the lawn stood a boy cousin and he had fastened a frog to a monkey-puzzle tree. It looked like a crucified thing... I was frantic. In a passion of pity I tried to get it off the horrid spikes, but I could not reach up to it. So I tore into the house to call someone, and as I ran, suddenly the thought came, ‘Now all the frogs will go to heaven.’”

A lesson in the mysteries of prayer – a tough one for any adult – came when Amy was three years old. Taught by her mother that God was a hearer and an answerer of prayer, one who could change water into wine, she determined to test His powers. Kneeling by her bed that night she asked for the one thing she most passionately longed for: blue eyes. Surely there would be no difficulty for the Lord in this. The little

girl went to bed with perfect confidence. She jumped out of bed at dawn, pushed a chair to the chest of drawers, climbed up and looked in the mirror – into the same brown eyes. She never forgot the bewilderment she felt until, somehow, an explanation was given (did the Lord Himself speak to her, or did someone else?): *Isn't NO an answer?* So prayer was not magic. Like her earthly father who loved her, her heavenly Father might also say no.

Given a doll's house complete with lovely furniture and properly dressed dolls, Amy displeased her old nurse, Bessie, by emptying the house and filling it instead with moss, stones, beetles, and earwigs – things she found far more interesting than the toys nice children were supposed to like.

Their father took them for walks even on Sundays (Sunday walks were frowned on by the Presbyterians in those days), through fields of pink clover or blue flax, to the ponds to see swans and, on weekdays, to watch the great black dripping wheel of the scotch mill where the woody fibre was beaten from the flax to make linen.

They had books – all the children's books that could be had then – and toys, which included a toy telephone soon after the telephone was invented. There were always pets – Daisy, the yellow and white cat, Gildo, the collie, Fanny and Charlie, the ponies. David and Catherine Carmichael loved beauty and tried to surround their children with beautiful things, keeping far from them, when possible, all that was not beautiful. They gave them a microscope and lenses to encourage them to study and observe, taught them capillary action by pointing out how water climbed from grain to grain in a lump of sugar, demonstrated electricity by rubbing a piece of amber on a coat sleeve till tiny scraps of paper flew up to it.

Amy's grandmother lived in a small house close to Strangford Lough (Gaelic for lake or sea), in a place called Portaferry. The tide there was said to be the second strongest in the world. The children were allowed to go rowing within certain limits. One evening Amy and her brothers passed the limits, were caught in a swift current, and swept toward the bar. "I was steering, my brothers were rowing hard, but they were powerless against the current. 'Sing!' they shouted to me, and I sang at the top of my voice the first thing that came into my head:

*'He leadeth me, O blessed thought,
O words with heavenly comfort fraught;
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.'*"

J. H. GILMORE

The children did not attend school in the early years, but were taught by a succession of governesses. One of them, "an unfortunate Englishwoman," did not stick it out for long, and when she departed they all trooped down to see her off – "We wanted to be sure she went!" Her replacement, Eleanor Milne, was much beloved, like an older sister to the children. She taught them poetry, told them stories of the great martyrs of Scotland and England. The last words of Ridley to Latimer stuck in Amy's mind: "Be of good cheer, brother, for God will either assuage the fury of the flame, or else strengthen us to abide it." When he and Latimer were chained and the fire kindled, Latimer said, "Be of good comfort, brother Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as I trust shall never be put out."

As the sternness of an Irish winter, with its gloom and wetness and icy winds, puts apple cheeks on both old and young, so the sternness of Christian discipline put red blood – spiritual health – into the girl who could not have imagined then the buffetings she would be called on to endure. But it was a peaceful childhood nevertheless, its discipline balanced by buttered toast and raspberry jam in front of the nursery fire, the soft sougning of the wind in the chimney as the children listened to stories, the sweet, sweet sound of a mother's singing, pony rides, tree climbing, swimming in the frigid sea. It was a peaceful home in a peaceful village. Amy's testimony long afterwards was: "I don't think there could have been a happier child than I was."