

# Gladys Aylward

Gladys Aylward was born at Edmonton in London in the year 1901. Her father was a postman and Gladys played in the street with her sister Violet, like the other children of the neighbourhood. At school and at Sunday School she learnt to know and to love her Bible and to trust in God. She loved hymn-singing best of all. When the war planes flew over London to drop bombs in the First World War, Gladys collected her young friends at her house. They sang hymns to drown the noise and to forget their fear.

When Gladys left school she became a parlour-maid. (That meant that she did house work for rich people.) One day she read in a magazine about the China Inland Mission which had been set up by Hudson Taylor. 200 missionaries were needed in China.

"That is what God wants me to do," Gladys decided: At once she offered herself to the Mission and she went to train at its College. But after three months the Principal sent for her. "Learning is too hard for you," he said kindly "Besides, by the time you finished the course here you would be thirty years old. You would find it very hard to learn a new language at that age. There are many other ways to serve God." Gladys Aylward went back sadly to her old work but she could not give up her great ambition.

Had not Abraham obeyed God and gone out into a strange land? Did not Moses take up God's call and lead his people out into the wilderness? "They trusted in God. I will too" she vowed.

Since the Mission would not accept Gladys, she knew she would have to find the money herself to get to China. She went to a new post in the household of a famous explorer in London. When she got there Gladys had two and a half pennies and her Bible. "O God," she prayed, "here's my Bible and my money and here's me. Please use us!" It cost 90 pound to go to China by sea. But Gladys found that going by railway right across Europe would cost 47 pounds. "But Russia and China are at war and you might never get to China," she was told. Nothing could put her off and she began to save hard, working even in her free time to earn extra money. One day she heard of Mrs. Lawson, a missionary in China, who was very old and wanted a helper. Gladys wrote to her at once and soon came an exciting letter from China. "If you can get to Tientsin I will send a guide to meet you," Mrs. Lawson wrote. Gladys saved harder than ever.

In October 1930, Gladys Aylward left London by train for China. She had 9 pennies in her pocket, a traveler's cheque for 2 pounds, her passport and her train tickets, her Bible, one suitcase for her clothes and another full of food. A saucepan and a kettle were tied to a suitcase with string. For ten days the train rattled and jolted across Europe and Siberia. Then, near the borders of Manchuria, there came the sound of guns and the train could go no further. Gladys Aylward had to walk back many miles along the railway track to the last station, camping at night on the line in the bitter wind and blinding snow of Siberia. She got another train to Vladivostok and from there went by boat to Japan where the missionaries helped her to find a ship

sailing to China. At last, after traveling for a month, Gladys Aylward reached Tientsin in China. Then by train and bus and mule she went far inland to Yangcheng where she found Mrs. Lawson living in a tumble-down house.

Gladys Aylward soon found how difficult her work would be. Chinese peasants threw mud at her.

“You must not mind,” Mrs. Lawson said. “We are ‘Lao-yang-kwei’ (‘foreign devils’) to them. We must get to know them. Let’s turn this house into an inn for the Muleteers. (An inn is a place for travelers to stay.) Yang, my old cook, will give them good food. We will tell them Bible stories. Then they will carry the Good News of Jesus wherever they go.”

Soon the inn was repaired and opened. It was named ‘The Inn of Eight Happinesses’. People in this area traveled on mules. At first none of the travelers would come. Then one day Gladys met the train and dragged the first mule of a train into the inn. The other mules followed and the men who looked after the mules had to come too.

Before long good food and fine stories filled the inn every night. Yang taught Gladys the Chinese language and so she too could tell stories of Jesus. When Mrs. Lawson died, Gladys Aylward was left alone.

In those days there was a custom in China to bind the feet of young girls so that their feet could not grow. The toes were bent downwards and tight bandages applied. It was thought that tiny feet were very beautiful, but of course it was very painful for the girls and they could not walk properly. One day the Mandarin (governor) of Yangcheng came to the inn with all his servants. “The Government has made a new law” he said. “Women must not bind their feet any more. We need a woman to see that this law is carried out. You can have wages, a mule and two soldiers. Will you do it?” “Yes,” said Gladys, “so long as you realize that I shall teach my Christian religion wherever I go.” “That is your own affair,” replied the Mandarin. Gladys went round the villages, seeing the new law was obeyed and making friends with the women and children. Eagerly they listened to stories of Jesus, who came from God and died to win their love.

Gladys Aylward lived a busy life. One day she was summoned urgently to the prison where thieves and murderers were rioting. Boldly she went in, while frightened soldiers stayed safely outside, and she stopped the killing. They called her ‘Zhi-weh-deh,’ ‘The Virtuous One’, and she became well-known for her bravery. Another day she met a dirty child-dealer (someone who sold the children of poor families to wealthy people who wanted slaves). She bought the poor little girl that was being sold, out of pity. Before long Gladys Aylward had adopted four other orphan children.

In 1938 a war had broken out between China and Japan. It took some time for the fighting to reach the inland, but finally the bomber planes encircled the city where Gladys lived. They came again, and this time dropped bombs on the city. Gladys was beaten unconscious by soldiers with rifle butts and kicks. Later, the Japanese offered \$100 reward for her capture so she knew that she must flee from the city with the children to a village far away. There she knew of some Christians who could help her

look after the children. By this time Gladys was looking after nearly one hundred children.

It was soon obvious that even the village would not be safe. She knew of a centre for homeless children far away beyond the mountains in Siam. She must take them there. They would have to go on foot. The Mandarin, who had now become a Christian, gave Gladys some sacks of rice and two men to carry them.

It normally took four days to cross the mountains, but because of the Japanese soldiers, they had to avoid the main road. They would have to pass through difficult terrain.

"It will take you at least twelve days," said the Mandarin.

The children walked and walked, without complaining for the first few days, but then they became tired. The sacks of rice started to get low. Every day Gladys read to the children from the Bible, and they asked God to help them. As the last of their food was used, Gladys knew that God would provide.

"We're hungry!" said the little ones.

"Look, some soldiers!" said Gladys. No, not Japanese soldiers. They were Chinese soldiers who gave the children some food. Soon this food was gone, and they were hungry again. God provided again as they came upon a mountain village.

"Please give us some food," begged Gladys. "The children are hungry."

The villagers gladly supplied them with food.

At last they reached the Great Yellow River. This was the final obstacle before reaching safety. When they reached the river bank they realized that there was no ferry to take them across. The Japanese soldiers had stopped all boats. If they waited here too long they would be discovered. They waited and prayed. Then a Chinese soldier came along.

"What are you doing here with all these children?" he asked. Gladys explained.

The soldier knew about a secret boat, hidden amongst the reeds on the other bank. The soldier gave a whistle. Quickly and quietly the boat made its way across the river. It collected the children and ferried them to the other side. Once again the Lord had provided for them, and protected them.

By the time they reached the town where the children would be cared for, Gladys was very ill. In this town there was a Christian mission hospital where Gladys stayed until she had recovered.

She then went home to England after 20 years in China. In 1957, with her health completely restored, she went back to the East, to the island of Formosa, (now called Taiwan), and continued her great work for God, spreading the Gospel of Jesus among the Chinese people until her death in 1970.

*Adapted from 700 Great Lives*

**Revision Questions**

1. In which country was Gladys Aylward born? (Ans: England).
2. On a map, trace Gladys's Journey from London, across the Channel to France, then through Europe to Siberia, to Manchuria, then to Vladivostok, then to Japan, to Tientsin, and then to Yangcheng.
3. Find the Yellow River and Sian (renamed Mynamar), where Gladys took 100 children on foot over the mountains.
4. How did God provide for Gladys and the children?
5. Find the island of Formosa where Gladys Aylward died.