

# The Virtuous One

*Like hundreds of other missionaries, Gladys Aylward went to China with nothing but faith and courage. They were all she ever needed.*

By: ELAINE WHITFIELD SHARP

Gladys Aylward's report card from the mission training school in London was far from impressive. She had failed theology and couldn't speak any Chinese. Yet as she trudged along London's streets to return to her former occupation as a parlor maid, Gladys was certain God was calling her, as he had called hundreds of Western missionaries since the early 1800's, to evangelize in China. If no missionary society would back her, then Gladys resolved that she must trust God and go alone.

The Roaring Twenties were in full swing. World War I was a distant memory, and London society celebrated its every whim. For Gladys this meant there was plenty of overtime work carrying trays of champagne and hors d'oeuvres for England's upper crust at hotels like the Savoy and the Ritz. That her feet ached constantly did not concern her; Gladys would endure anything until she could save up the train fare to China, even if it would take four years.

In the meantime Gladys seized every opportunity to memorize scripture, reasoning that if one wanted to spread the word of God one must know it. She also took every occasion to preach. Her stature barely exceeding five feet, she would stand on a soap box in all kinds of

weather, preaching to commuters scurrying past London's Hyde Park Corner toward the underground.

The long-awaited day finally arrived in October 1930. With her ticket and Bible in hand and two traveler's checks sewn inside her corset, Gladys set out to join Jeannie Lawson, a 70-year-old self-supporting missionary in central China. Gladys's proposal that she be the elderly woman's assistant had been warmly welcomed. Gladys arrived in the small town of Yangcheng in the Shansi Province to find Jeannie bustling about a dilapidated inn she'd just rented on an ancient mule-train trade route.

"Got it cheap 'cause the locals say it's haunted," Jeannie explained to Gladys in her Scottish lilt. "We'll fix it up, open an inn, and tell the muleteers Bible stories at night. The Chinese love stories and we'll tell them for free. We'll call it the Inn of Eight Happinesses, and when the muleteers leave here they'll repeat the stories we tell them for thousands of miles!"

But the villagers weren't so easy to convince. Gladys and Jeannie were "foreign devils," gossiped the locals, who often spat or threw dung at the pair. Word soon spread among the muleteers that the "devils" were living in the haunted house. The inn was boycotted.

It was Jeannie's idea that when a mule train neared, Gladys should run out, nab

the lead animal by the reins, and drag it into the inn's courtyard. The weary and hungry beasts behind would be only too happy to follow. What better way for a young missionary to learn how to be a fisher of men?

For weeks Gladys, clad in blue quilted pants, jacket, and straw hat, dragged in the mule trains with a combination of prayer and muscle. Soon the inn enjoyed a popular reputation. Here marvelous stories about Jesus were being told nightly around the courtyard fire - and they were free! Gradually Gladys learned to tell in Chinese the Bible stories she had memorized.

But Gladys's honeymoon year at the inn was abruptly shattered when Jeannie, whose mind and body were failing, flew into a rage over a minor disagreement and died some weeks later.

How, Gladys wondered, could she run the inn alone with no income? "Oh, God," she prayed, "show me your plan."

Gladys's prayer was soon answered. The mandarin of the Shansi Province commanded her to become an official foot inspector. Gladys was to travel to southern Shansi's remote mountain villages, enforcing the central government's prohibition against the ancient custom of binding infant girls' feet, which kept them fashionably small but caused a lifetime of pain. Gladys was the only woman in the region whose feet were not deformed- the ideal candidate to negotiate the mountain passes. She accepted the position, realizing God's plan: The small income would keep the inn solvent, and

the job was God's invitation to tell hundreds of peasants about Jesus.

Wherever she went the villagers, who had heard she was a gifted and polished storyteller, were eager to hear about Jesus and about how he loved and protected his followers, even after his death. Eventually, converts could be found in every remote village and hamlet.

Having returned from a foot inspection tour, Gladys was back at the inn with the Christian community that had grown up there where the mandarin ordered her to go stop a riot at Yangcheng's prison.

"But what can I do?" Gladys protested to the prison's governor when she arrived. "If I go in there the convicts will kill me!"

"But how can they kill you?" the governor puzzled. "You've been telling everybody that the living God protects his followers."

Gladys knew that if she refused this challenge she would be finished as a missionary. This prison's heavy door was opened, and Gladys quickly stepped through. As the large iron key turned behind her, Gladys froze with horror at the scene ahead. In the courtyard the dead lay with groaning men in pools of blood and terrified convicts crouched in corners. An axe-wielding convict paced toward her.

"Oh God, give me strength," Gladys prayed in one breath, before commanding the next, "Give me that axe at once!"

The prisoner returned a cold icy stare and, stalking closer, raised the axe toward Gladys. Then suddenly he stopped in his tracks, lowered the axe, and meekly handed it to her.

Soon Gladys learned the cause of the riot. The inmates depended on their families for food, but often no food came, and they were left to starve. Sometimes the wardens would come and behead one of their number. All this had become too much to bear.

Gladys's anger burned. She knew nothing of prison reform, but she knew this was God's next task for her. The prison governor, who now held Gladys in reverence, was willing to listen to her suggestions. Gladys began visiting the prisoners and telling them about Jesus. She brought them looms and a miller's wheel so they could earn their food by weaving cloth and grinding grain.

After the prison incident the inmates and townsfolk named Gladys Ai-weh-deh, "The Virtuous One." She had won their confidence, and those who once spat or threw mud at her now bowed respectfully.

In 1936 Gladys became a Chinese citizen. Shortly after, the inn's muleteers relayed disturbing news: The Japanese had invaded China and Manchuria. Gladys felt uneasy. They would not be interested in a little place like Yangcheng, would they? They were.

When the silver planes circled over Yangcheng one sunny spring afternoon in 1938, the villagers ran out to greet the "silver birds" with cries of delight. Shouts of joy turned to screams of

terror as Japanese bombs sent huge chunks of masonry flying. Gladys, who was leading a small prayer meeting at the inn, was buried under a pile of rubble.

When she was finally rescued Gladys ran to the town. The streets were strewn with partial corpses, and people still trapped beneath the debris screamed for help. Sick and injured herself, Gladys prayed, "Jesus help me to serve your people now."

After rallying the unhurt into first-aid teams, Gladys made her way slowly through the city, bathing wounds with hot water and Lysol, bandaging with strips torn from bed sheets, and praying for the wounded and dying. In the following years, as the fighting raged in Shansi between the Japanese forces and Chinese Nationalist, scenes like this were to be frequently repeated. Traveling over the mountains she was so familiar with, Gladys opened make shift hospitals in caves and in people's homes. Wherever Ai-weh-deh went the wounded were taken, for this woman had a God who protected.

Gladys wrote to her mother in England, "Do not wish me out of this or in any way seek to get me out, for I will not be got out while this trial is on. These are my people; God has given them to me, and I will live or die for them for his glory."

At first Gladys refused when the Chinese Nationalists asked her to inform them of the Japanese troops' locations and numbers - for often she saw them while combing the fields and mountains for wounded peasants of the guerrilla

resistance. China, Gladys told the Nationalists, was God's land, and she was not fighting a human war. But as the torturing and killings escalated, Gladys longed all the more for a free and peaceful China. She began supplying the Nationalists with the information they needed to defeat their enemy.

Gladys was in Tsechow in the spring of 1940 when she learned that the Japanese were offering a hundred - dollar reward "for information leading to the capture alive of the small woman called Ai-weh-deh." Gladys knew that many in those desperate times would turn her in for the reward. She was torn by desire to stay with her people and by a sense of dread - she had recently been severely beaten by Japanese soldiers when she tried to stop a mass raping of mission women in Tsechow. Opening her Bible at random, Gladys stared in awe at the words before her: "Flee ye, fee ye into the mountains, dwell deeply in the hidden places, for the king of Babylon has conceived a purpose against you!"

Carrying only her Bible, Gladys fled back to Yangcheng by hidden mountain passes, pursued by Japanese soldiers, one of whose bullet found a target in her right shoulder.

As news of the impending Japanese advance in Yangcheng came, Gladys knew that she must take some 100 refugee children who had collected at the Inn of Eight Happinesses to an orphanage in Sian hundreds of miles away. The ancient trade routes were now too dangerous for travel. They

would have to walk along mountain back trails, a journey that would take at least two weeks.

On a March morning in 1940 a long line of chattering children clutching quilted bed rolls, wooden bowls, and chopsticks, trailed after Ai-weh-deh high into the mountains. For days they walked, their feet cut and bleeding from the sharp rocks. As the afternoons wore on the little ones clung to Gladys coat with pleas of "Ai-weh-deh, will you carry me? Ai-weh- deh, how much further?" Gladys and the older children carried the little ones, but as each day passed she experienced a strange, creeping fatigue.

Seven nights out of Yangcheng the food supply was exhausted. As the sun sank beneath the lonely peaks and the cold mountain mist shrouded the rocks, Gladys peered at the barren ground, but it offered no natural nutrition. She sat silently praying with the children. Suddenly two of the older boys who had been scouting ran back yelling, "Soldiers, soldiers ahead!"

If Gladys told the children to scatters some of the little ones would be lost in the wild terrain as night quickly fell. Before she had a time to speculate further, the soldiers marched around the bend ahead.

There was panic as both men and children scattered behind the rocks. Minutes later the whole group emerged, laughing hysterically. Chinese Nationalist soldiers! Gladys did not even have to ask for something to eat, the

soldiers immediately delved into their packs and handed out candy and food.

Finally Gladys and the children emerged from the mountains at the village of Yuan Cha on the Yellow River. Here they would get food and a boat to take them across river, Gladys had told the children. But they found neither villagers, food, nor boats. The Japanese were advancing and all river traffic had ceased. For many days they waited, eating weeds stewed in a pot, singing hymns, and peering at the river for a boat until their eyes stung.

“Ai-weh-deh, do you remember the story you told us about how God parted the waters of the Red Sea and how Moses led the Israelites across?” asked one of the children. “Well, why doesn’t he do the same for us now?”

How could Gladys explain to this innocent child that miracles weren’t just dispensed at human will? Still, they knelt and prayed for a boat.

It was the children’s singing that gave them away. The Nationalist officer and his men who were patrolling the banks could hardly believe their ears. Soon chattering groups of children were being ferried across the river, exhilarated because God had “parted” the waters.

A month after leaving Yangcheng, Gladys and the children arrived in Sian. With the children safe Gladys collapsed,

near death. The chief physician of a Sian hospital made this brave woman his special project. Weeks later Gladys finally regained consciousness, but never quite recovered from her injuries she had received at the hands of the Japanese.

Gladys remained in Sian, working for the New Life Christian Movement. In 1949 she returned to England, where she told her story to church groups and on national television. Eventually her story was published as a book called “The Small Woman” and made into popular movie.

The Communist victory in China in 1949 prevented Gladys’s return, so she went to Taiwan, where many Chinese, including some of the children she had taken across the mountains, now lived.

Gladys Aylward died in Taiwan in 1970, at the age of 68. Hundreds of lives had been saved and souls won because this former parlor maid had believed in God and had endured in the face of extreme adversity. Ai-wi- deh is gone, but many will never forget the small woman, or her God.

## China Today

Gladys Aylward is only one example of the great Western missionary movement that evangelized China from the early 1800’s until the community victory in 1949. There are many heroic stories of men and women, both Protestant and Catholic, who endured great hardship in order to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, the missionary movement was also flawed at times by collaboration with the empire-building ambitions of the Western nations. Western church leaders, especially in the period before 1900, generally felt that their own government offered the only change of technological development for China. This led to unhealthy alliances that alienated many Chinese.

In 1900 Chinese resentment of colonialism boiled over in the Boxer Rebellion, in which many missionaries and thousands of Chinese Christians died. Realizing their past mistakes, both Protestant and Catholic missionaries began working to build indigenous churches with Chinese clergy, but the damage had been done.

Following the Communist victory of 1949, Chinese Christians were persecuted for their associations with colonialism and the “reluctant exodus” of Western missionaries took place. The government created the Three-Self Patriotic Movement for Chinese Protestants and forced the Chinese Catholic Church to break all ties with Rome.

Today, despite government attempts to quell it, a Christian revival is reportedly underway in China, at least among Protestants. James Hudson Taylor III, the great –grandson of a famous 19th century missionary, reports that the Christian message is spreading quickly in China via House Church Movement, which the government finds difficult to monitor. Taylor directs the Overseas

Missionary Fellowship, based in Singapore.

Because the government tends to downplay the numbers of Christians, it’s difficult for observers like Taylor to get an accurate count of believers.

“When I returned to China in 1980 and then again in the summer of 1983, there were reports that in some of the communes as many as 70 percent of the members were Christians,” Taylor says. “I’ve heard estimates of up to 50 million or more, but I don’t think that could be possible. In 1949 there were only about 800,000 Protestant Christians in China, and that would mean incredible growth had occurred.”

“But when I was in China in 1980, one pastor told me that he had just baptized 114 new believers, and another said that some 7,000 people in his neighborhood have become Christians.”

Believers are still persecuted for their faith and treated as second-class citizens by China’s Marxist government, much as they are in the Soviet Union, says Taylor. He urges Christians who enjoy religious freedom to pray for their brothers and sisters in closed nations.