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## ONE

Gladys Aylward sat in a hard, high-backed chair across from a sparse desk. The office was well lit but drafty, and the dark, wintry bleakness of London outside made the window reflect her face like a mirror. She trembled at her image. Such a pitiful little mouse. Yes, she certainly looked like a mouse with luminous dark eyes and a sharp, prominent nose. Did she hear the hardwood floors creaking outside the door?

“Forgive me, God,” she mumbled under her breath.

Anxiety gnawed on her. Did it mean she didn’t trust God? Surely God would forgive her. Who wouldn’t be rattled after being summoned out of the middle of a theology class at the Women’s Training Center of the China Inland Mission? Did she hear someone outside the room? Yes! The creaking of the hardwood hallway grew louder and louder. . . .

“Oh no. Please, God. . .”

The door opened. “Miss Gladys Aylward.” The

voice of the Center's principal sounded hollow.

Gladys gulped and nodded. Where was her courage? The tall man sat down behind the desk heavily. His face was stone. Its coldness sent chills to Gladys's heart. She saw now he held a folder. Surely it contained her records at the Center. He opened the folder. She thought she saw him take a deep breath.

"China became very receptive to missionaries in 1928 when Chiang Kai-shek became president. So, Miss Aylward, we've begun a great effort to increase our mission staffs there by 20 percent." He paused and blinked. The corners of his mouth seemed to curl down in self-reproach. Had he suddenly realized that his touting this great opportunity would make rejection even more bitter for Gladys? His next words were hammer blows. "It's about your record. . ."

"It's been a good ten years since I attended Silver Street School in Edmonton, sir," she blurted, adding almost hysterically, "I don't remember ever passing a test there."

"You're too modest, Miss Aylward. We know your record there was satisfactory. Besides, this meeting is not about your record at Silver Street School. This is about your record here at the Center. After all, you've been with us now for three months—"

"Yes, sir, and it's been a dream come true."

He set his jaw. Her gratitude seemed to unnerve him. "It's not that you don't assimilate the material taught you. You do. It just seems that you're starting well behind the others. Very far behind, in fact. Your instructors tell me that no less than three years will be required for you to

bring yourself up to the level of competence we demand of our missionaries before we send them out.”

“Then I’m willing to take those three years, sir.”

He blinked. Had he wanted to roll his eyes? “I’m sure you are willing, Miss Aylward. It’s just that by the time you reach the level of competence we desire for our missionaries, you will be almost thirty years old.” He rushed on to prevent her from another show of willingness. “Everyone here agrees it is nearly impossible to learn the Chinese language at that advanced age.”

“But. . .” The sentence died in her throat. “Nothing, sir.”

The famous missionary David Livingstone was twenty-eight when he mastered Bechuana in South Africa. Another famous missionary, Mary Slessor, was about the same age when she mastered the Efik language in Nigeria. Both these great missionaries learned very difficult tonal languages at nearly thirty years of age. Should Gladys protest by mentioning their stories?

No. If she had learned nothing else in all her years as a parlormaid it was when to speak to authority and when not to speak. Besides, this poor principal seemed to be skirting a larger objection to Gladys. He was sparing her feelings, she was sure. What was it about her? Her slowness at learning? Her apparent timidity? Her apparent softness? Whatever it was, they had lost confidence in her.

Was her great dream of becoming a missionary to China really over? Then why had she gone one night several years ago to a revival in a church, not particularly moved but curious enough to go back later to the church

to seek advice? Why had the pastor not been there, yet his wife had counseled Gladys? Why, under the wife's sober instruction, had God been reborn in her? Why had the longing to go to China risen inside her like a calling? Why would God delude a poor, simple, uneducated working girl? Why? Why? Why? Her great dream of becoming a missionary to China was over. That reality struck at her heart like an icy dagger.

"You have a wonderful work record, Miss Aylward," said the principal brightly.

"I won't go back into service, sir," she said obstinately.

But that vow was nothing but pure stubbornness. What choice did she have? She had to work. She couldn't just go home to Edmonton in north London to live with Dad and Mum. That just wasn't done. She couldn't even go home to live with them while she worked. In service one had to live in the manor night and day. Of course, she was still young enough to have prospects of marriage. So what if she hadn't yet met a man who was serious and devout? It wasn't as if such a man didn't exist. She was no prize herself, but she was healthy and hard working. But in the meantime she had to work. Oh, how she dreaded going back into service. It wasn't just the shame before her own people of having failed. It was the shame before God of serving a few rich people when she could have served so many of the needy.

"Perhaps you can help the mission cause yet," mullied the principal.

"Yes, I'll go to China as an assistant!" she quickly volunteered. "I'll do anything. I'll—"

"I meant you could help us here in Britain. We have

a missionary couple returning from China to retire in Bristol. They are elderly. They will need assistance.”

“Oh, I don’t. . .” Gladys paused. No one who read the Bible like she had did not know how complicated God’s plan can be for even the righteous. Who could not marvel at the way Abraham was tested? Or Paul? All through the Holy Bible. And all through history after that. Did John Bunyan give up the gospel when threatened with endless days in prison? No, he endured an unheated cell in Bedford for twelve years. So why should Gladys consider serving two retired missionaries beyond her endurance?

“I will be glad to be of service, sir,” she concluded. Fighting back tears, Gladys even managed a smile.

## TWO

Gladys was shrouded in gloom as she packed her belongings at the Women's Training Center in Highbury. She had come there months ago from her parlor-maid's job in central London, past the Marble Arch, past King's Cross, up Pentonville Road, past an old shopping square called the "Angel." Oh, how high her spirits had been then. As high, mind you, as they were low now as she headed to her parents' home in Edmonton.

"A failure," she muttered.

It was only her Mum's bubbly optimism that kept her afloat until she traveled to Bristol by train. Rolling west across the lovely green shires of southern England to Bristol should have been a wonderful adventure, but Gladys was gloomy. Then she remembered that John Wesley had made the same trip over a hundred years before, and he had been gloomy about his prospects, too. But his meeting in Bristol with George Whitefield changed his life—

and Britain's. From a refined, even dandified, Anglican church pastor Wesley became a preaching firebrand of the outdoors—and Britain was never the same again. But who was meek Gladys Aylward to compare herself with John Wesley?

“You must learn to trust God with all your heart and soul, Gladys,” urged the male half of the retired missionary couple in Bristol after she arrived. “You came here to Bristol with doubt in your heart. Listen with your heart and mind and He will give you some sign.”

“But how?”

“Read your Bible. Pray with fervor. Talk to people who serve Christ. Serve Christ yourself!”

Bristol was not joy or fulfillment for Gladys, but it was certainly enlightening. Under the elderly couple's sagacity she began to learn about the real China, too—not the rosy images painted by the China Inland Mission to recruit missionaries, but the blackness of the real China: the throwing away of girl babies like trash, the binding of women's feet into crippled clubs, the sickening arrogance of men taking more than one wife. The plight of women in China was an abomination. And the condition of men was not much better. This old couple had seen it all, and they didn't mind telling Gladys about it.

Did they do it to harm the missionary effort? Not at all. “Quite the opposite!” stormed the old missionaries.

Gladys knew exactly what they meant. The horrors of China demanded the love of Christ. And it was the wife who soon sized up Gladys and told her about herself. “You've too big a heart to waste on just two old fools who think they are righteous anyway. We're going to find

you a spot where you can help the lost.”

“Yes, we’ll not slow this young warrior down,” added her husband. “She must move on!”

Whether it was the old man or the old woman or Gladys who arrived at the conclusion Christ would be better served by Gladys moving on into “rescue” work was hard to say. Certainly Gladys herself, except for the privilege of hearing the missionary couple talk about China, thought she was wasted in Bristol. But all three were so immersed in local evangelism as well as correspondence everywhere—yes, Gladys, too, because she read and wrote letters for them—that it was hard to know when or how or from whom the city of Swansea beckoned Gladys.

She had hardly gotten to know the great port city of Bristol. It swarmed with church history. Bristol’s cathedral was nearly eight hundred years old. The bowling green at Pithay was where George Whitefield dragged reluctant John Wesley on April 1, 1739, to hear his first “field preaching.” At a brickyard on Saint Phillip’s Plain, Wesley himself field-preached the next day. Near the Horse Fair, Wesley built the first Methodist chapel. But Gladys was not a spectator.

“I must serve Christ myself,” she told the old couple’s approving faces as she left.

Swansea, a port city also, was fifty miles due west of Bristol. For a young lady from north London, it was a bit like foreign mission work. For Swansea was in Wales with its musical but tongue-twisting Welsh language that, to Gladys anyway, seemed to be missing half the consonants found in the English language. Besides the Welsh-speaking villagers who came down from the coal-laden

mountain valleys to the port, there were sailors from all over the globe. And Gladys began to discern phrases of Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, Russian, German, Dutch, and French.

Her work was at the Sunshine Hostel. She was far too small to confront the burly sailors lurching drunkenly from the taverns infesting the docks. No, as assistant matron, it was her mission to rescue the women who drank with the sailors. At first she keyed in on the youngest ones, many of whom had just come to Swansea. For them it was not too late. Gladys would shepherd them back to the mission hostel where they were sobered up and put to bed. If there was time they were regaled with sermons and hymns at the Snellings Gospel Mission. The next morning the young ladies were given fare to return home. Once in a while, Gladys would challenge older women. Occasionally she could get one to go to the Snellings Gospel Mission with her, perhaps more out of fatigue than remorse. For these "fallen women" were nearly always back in the taverns the next evening.

"I enjoyed the hymns, honey," many would say in heavy-accented English, just one of many languages of commerce they had learned.

But the thought of China began to haunt Gladys. She saved not a penny in her work in Swansea. What little she had she routinely gave away to young ladies too penniless to get home without her help. This generosity nagged at Gladys, for she had begun to dream of getting to China on her own. The old couple had planted the seed. Women outlived men in China as well as everywhere else in the world. And China teemed with elderly

women missionaries, so the old couple said. If only Gladys could get there, surely there would be an elderly woman missionary who would welcome her assistance.

“Then who knows what great things will follow?” she told herself hopefully.

Nevertheless, Gladys endured Swansea. She endured the depressing frequency of vomit on her uniform. She endured the difficulty of trying to penetrate drunken brains with righteousness. She endured seeing the old prostitutes go back to sin again and again, yet knowing she not only had to forgive them again and again but try to rescue them again and again. She endured the danger, even though Gladys discovered that trusting God made her fearless most of the time. She endured the drunken sailors who tried to paw her. She endured the pervading sin of the docks, because Gladys knew the Lord had gone straight to sinners Himself.

She also endured the weather with its sameness. Unlike London, the summer days were never sunny nor did they reach seventy-five degrees. And in winter, the days were never freezing cold, with hard flakes of snow blowing like leaves. No, in Swansea it rained two days out of three.

So what finally pushed Gladys beyond her endurance of Swansea? “China!” she blurted one day upon reading a letter from a former employer.

Gladys had put the word out among her friends in great manors and her friends doing churchwork: She was willing to go to China even as a nanny if necessary, or at last resort she would work in a good manor so she could save money to go to China on her own. So it was

no surprise one of her many contacts had written her of an opening for a parlormaid. Gladys had a reputation in service. She always belittled herself as "not very smart but quick and willing," but the letter said the wife of Sir Francis Younghusband wanted someone dependable, someone who could really help the housekeeper, someone who could manage the under parlormaid. The letter said Gladys fit those requirements perfectly. There was an underlying motive, Gladys was sure; probably her former employer wanted to ingratiate herself to the Younghusbands. And Gladys would never have been enticed with flattery anyway, whether she suspected it was true or not. No, the thing that grabbed her was the reputation of Sir Francis Younghusband. Unsaid in the letter was that years ago, Colonel Francis Younghusband had led British expeditions through the perilous Mustagh Pass and over old silk routes into Tibet and. . .

"China!" gasped Gladys. Her heart beat faster and faster as she speculated. A knighted gentleman like Sir Francis Younghusband would have quite a library on China. She was sure of that. If she quickly proved herself, milady would probably let her read his books. And the Younghusbands would pay a handsome salary, too. Perhaps twenty pounds sterling a year. And if Gladys saved her salary, worked extra parties on her days off and such, maybe even sold her belongings, too, why who knew how soon she could afford passage to China?

Her heart beat faster just thinking about it. Once in China she would offer her assistance to any one of a flock of aging missionaries. The rest would be pure joy in serving Christ. She went over it again and again in her

mind. It all seemed quite plausible. And soon it was all settled in her mind.

“Nothing can keep me from leaving Swansea now,” she told herself with determination.

Gladys had seen little of what was touted as scenic around Swansea. The fashionable resorts of Oystermouth and The Mumbles were pointed out to her in the distance. Ancient Oystermouth castle she saw not at all. Even more remote was the scenic valley that ran up from Neath into the Brecon Beacons—even though she had worked for the Christian Association of Women and Girls in Neath for a short time. “Oh, the Neath Valley with its grand gorges and spewing waterfalls will snatch your breath away,” everyone told her. But Gladys saw none of it. She would remember her short, dull work in Neath. She would certainly remember her hard work for the Sunshine Hostel in Swansea. She would remember Snellings Gospel Mission with its singing and comfort. She would remember the docks with their seedy night life. She would remember the smoke roiling up from the great steel mills to the southeast. She would remember the rain. But most of all, she would remember reading the letter from her former employer and the burst of joy at her remembrance of the site of one of Sir Francis Younghusband’s adventures.

“China!”

## THREE

My goodness," muttered Gladys as she stopped to survey her new manor in London.

For years she had worked in service in London's West End. West Enders considered themselves the very heart and soul of London. A few would have haughtily added "and all of England," and perhaps even claimed "and all of the British Empire!" Still, it was no wonder. The West End stretched from the Houses of Parliament on the Thames River all the way west beyond Kensington Palace and Notting Hill. Kensington, the Strand, Hyde Park, Buckingham Palace, Picadilly, the British Museum, Mayfair, the National Gallery, Westminster Abbey, Trafalgar Square—all were claimed by the West End. This had been Gladys's world for many years.

"But this," she marveled as she contemplated her new manor. "Am I ready for this?"

For her new manor was in Belgrave Square. The elegance of the Belgrave Square area was rivaled in London

only by the Mayfair area. Palatial three-story residences of yellow brick and white columns framed the square. Taste-ful fences and gates of black wrought iron separated the manors from the wide walkways. It was London at its most sumptuous, if one chose to regard Buckingham Palace—itsself no more than a three-minute stroll away down Chapel Street—as not relevant to normal human beings.

Gladys could not believe her good fortune. “I’ve been secured as the new house parlormaid,” she told the footman who answered the bell at the servant’s entrance.

The footman was slightly taken aback. Gladys had assumed her very best Oxford accent. As a child she had dreamed night and day of being on the stage. In spite of her physical shortcomings—tiny stature and timid-looking face—she had been in school plays. She had become a splendid mimic. Years of service to her betters had trained her to speak pure “Oxonian” any time it was required. In service it helped. It was intimidating. The footman could not hide his puzzlement all the while he took Gladys to the butler. But by the time he found the butler his attitude had changed to resentment.

“Sir, ’er royal ’ighness ’ere is reportin’ for ’er coronation,” he seethed in his best cockney accent.

In the upstairs bedroom the butler assigned her, Gladys was struck by doubt. The smallness of the room seemed crushing. All the rigid rules of service came flooding over her. A servant must be seen as seldom as possible by her betters. A servant never speaks to a better unless she is spoken to first. Even the servants themselves had a hierarchy. Only senior servants like the