

GLADYS AYLWARD

(Feb. 24, 1902 - Jan. 3, 1970)

Gladys Aylward was born into a working class family in Edmonton, London on February 24, 1902. Since she did not excel scholastically, she became a parlor maid at the age of 14. She seemed destined to spend her life in low paying service jobs for wealthy patrons. At the age of 18, however, she attending a revival and gave her life to Christ. Touched by the plight of millions without Christ, she felt God calling her to be a missionary to China. Against all odds her dreams came true!

Eight long years later, at age 26, she finally became a probationer with the China Inland Mission Center in London. Unfortunately, she failed her exams. Some felt she was intellectually incapable of learning the Chinese language. She continued, however, to work, dream, and save her money. When she heard that Mrs. Jeannie Lawson, a 73 year old missionary to China, needed help, she volunteered and was accepted. Gladys departed for Yangchen, China in October 1930.

Since she didn't have enough money to go by sea, Gladys risked the dangers of traveling by land across Russia on the Trans-Siberian Railway. She had only her Bible, passport, and 2 pounds ninepence. Her journey as a single woman traveling alone, was made even more dangerous by the undeclared war between China and Russia. With the help of God she arrived safely at Vladivostok, then sailed to Japan, then Tientsin, and completed her journey by by train, bus, and mule.

Since Yangchen was an overnight stop for mule caravans, these two godly woman opened an inn and provided food and lodging for both men and animals. As the travelers rested they heard stories about Jesus. Since these mule trains traveled to many other small towns, men in the caravan would often repeat the stories they heard about Jesus to others.

Then, Mrs. Lawson took a terrible fall and died within a few days. This left Gladys and a Christian cook to continue the work without her. Since Gladys was becoming fluent in Chinese, she was approached by the local Mandarin who hired her to visit all the villages in their area. Her job was to insure that families were no longer binding the feet of their little girls. This, of course, gave her many more opportunities to tell the story of Jesus. Next she was called upon to help quell a riot in a local prison. Still more opportunities! Her growing reputation for wisdom and kindness earned her the name "Ai-weh-deh" which means "virtuous one". She became a Chinese citizen in 1936.

When Japan attacked China in 1938 she not only cared for wounded soldiers, but also 100 orphans. When the Japanese placed a bounty on her head, she led the children to safety in Sian, a hundred miles away. The 12 day journey brought them to the Yellow River, but they had no way to cross. In desperate need of a miracle, all the children knelt to pray, and then began singing. Providentially, a Chinese officer heard their song, realized their plight, and arranged for a boat to take them across the river to safety. At the end of the journey Gladys was suffering from typhus, pneumonia, a relapsing fever, and malnutrition. She never completely regained her health.

Even in sickness, however, she continued to minister. She traveled from village to village telling the story of Jesus, and ministering to those who were sick and in prison. In 1947 the new Communist regime took control and Gladys was forced to leave her beloved China. She chose to return to England as she had a growing concern about the spiritual decline in her own nation.

Gladys Aylward became famous in 1957 when Alan Burgess wrote a book about her, "The Small Woman". (She was only 5 feet tall) That book was condensed in the Reader's Digest and then made into a movie, "The Inn of the Sixth Happiness". Ingrid Bergman was chosen to play Gladys.. When Newsweek magazine reviewed the movie the story seemed so incredible that they assumed it to be fiction. It was not! Gladys Aylward was a true heroine. She died January 3, 1970 and joined the ranks of other heroes and heroines of the faith of whom the world is not worthy!