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1

China's Millions

MY ONE BIG AMBITION in life was to go on the stage. I had nothing much in the way of education, but I could talk, and I loved to act.

I was brought up in a Christian home and went to church and Sunday school as a child, but as I grew older I became impatient with anything to do with religion.

In those days most girls of the ordinary working class went into "service" because there were few other openings for them. So I became a parlormaid; but in the evenings I went to dramatic classes, as I was determined to save and, by hook or by crook, get on the "boards."

One night, however, for some reason I can never explain, I went to a religious meeting. There, for the first time, I realized that God had a claim on my life, and I accepted Jesus Christ as my Saviour. I joined the Young Life Campaign, and in one of their magazines I read an article about China that made a terrific impression on me. To realize that millions of Chinese had never heard of Jesus Christ was to

me a staggering thought, and I felt that surely we ought to do something about it.

First I visited my Christian friends and talked to them about it, but no one seemed very concerned. Then I tried my brother. Surely if I helped him he would gladly go off to China!

"Not me!" he said bluntly. "That's an old maid's job. Why don't you go yourself?"

Old maid's job, indeed! I thought angrily. But the thrust had gone home. Why should I try pushing other people off to China? Why didn't I go myself?

I began to ask how I could prepare to go to a country thousands of miles away, of which I knew practically nothing except that they needed people to tell them of God's love for them. I was told that I must offer myself to a certain missionary society, and eventually I went to this society's college for three months.

By the end of that time the committee decided that my qualifications were too slight, my education too limited to warrant my acceptance. The Chinese language, they decided, would be far too difficult for me to learn.

I left that committee room in silence, all my plans in ruins. Looking back now, I cannot blame them. I know, if no one else does, how stupid I must have seemed then. The fact that I learned not only to speak, but also to read and write the Chinese language like a native in later years, is to me one of God's great miracles.

The committee chairman followed me out.

"What are you going to do, Miss Aylward?" he asked kindly.

"I don't know," I replied, "but I am sure God does not want me to be a parlormaid again. He wants me to do something for Him."

"In the meantime, would you like to help two of our retired missionaries who need a housekeeper?"

"Where are they?"

"In Bristol. Will you go?"

"Very well, but first I would like to say thank you for the kindness of everyone here. I'm sorry I haven't been able to learn much at the college, but I *have* learned to pray, *really* pray as I never did before, and that is something for which I'll always be grateful."

* * *

I went to Bristol to look after a Dr. and Mrs. Fisher. I learned many lessons from them; their implicit faith in God was a revelation to me. Never before had I met anyone who trusted Him so utterly, so implicitly and so obediently. They knew God as their Friend, not as a Being far away, and they lived with Him every day.

They told me stories of their own lives overseas. "God never lets you down. He sends you, guides you and provides for you. Maybe He doesn't answer your prayers as you want them answered, but He *does* answer them. Remember, no is as much an answer as yes."

"How am I to know if He wants me to go to China or to stay in Bristol?" I queried.

"He will show you in His own good time. Keep on watching and praying."

The old missionaries helped me and strengthened me, but still I longed to be "about my Father's business."

Next I went to Neath to work for the Christian Association of Women and Girls. But I did not find enough scope, so I moved to Swansea where I worked as a rescue sister. Each night I went down near the docks and in the dark, unpleasant streets, under the yellow gas lamps, I pleaded with the women and young girls who loitered there.

I went into public houses and rescued girls the sailors had made drunk, and took them back to the hostel. And on Sundays I took as many as I could to Snelling's Gospel Mission.

I enjoyed this work and felt it was something worthwhile, but still the thought of China tormented me. Always it was China! I could not rid myself of the idea that God wanted me there.

I decided that if no missionary society would send me, perhaps I could go out with a family who needed a children's nurse. I went to London to ask advice; but everyone was against such an idea.

"Put the thought of China out of your head," they insisted. "Carry on with the grand rescue work you are doing."

I went back to Swansea depressed and dejected, and in the train I pulled out my Bible. "I don't really know enough about this to start preaching to other people," I said to myself as I turned over the pages. "Maybe I ought to set about really getting to know it."

So I started to read at the very first verse and I read on until I came to Abraham. "Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee: and I will . . . make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing" (Gen. 12:1-2).

That verse pulled me up sharply. Here was a man who had left everything—his home, his people, his security—and gone to a strange place because God told him to. Maybe God was asking me to do the same.

My next arresting message came when I read the story of Moses. Here again was a man who did something on nothing. What courage he had to set out with a crowd of people who had already shown themselves decidedly difficult! What faith he must have had to obey God and defy all the might of Egypt and the despotism of Pharaoh! But Moses had to make the move; he had to leave his quiet home in the desert.

Here I believed I had come upon a really important message. If I wanted to go to China, God would take me there; but I would have to be willing to move and to give up what little comfort and security I had.

Eventually I decided to return to London, get a job as a housemaid, and earn enough money to pay my fare to China.

On the third day on my new job, I was sitting on my bed reading my Bible. I had now reached Nehemiah. I felt very sorry for him and understood why he wept and mourned when he heard about Jerusalem in its great need and could do nothing about it. He was a sort of butler and had to obey his employer just like I did, I thought. Then I turned to the second chapter. "But he did go," I exclaimed aloud, and got up, a strange elation within me. "He went in spite of everything!"

As if someone was in the room, a voice said clearly, "Gladys Aylward, is Nehemiah's God your God?"

"Yes, of course!" I replied.

"Then do what Nehemiah did, and go."

"But I am not Nehemiah."

"No, but assuredly, I am his God."

That settled everything for me. I believed these were my marching orders.

I put my Bible on the bed, beside it my copy of *Daily Light* and, at the side of that, all the money I had—2½d.* What a ridiculous little collection it seemed, but I said simply, "O God, here's the Bible about which I long to tell others, here's my *Daily Light* that every day will give me a new promise, and here is 2½d. If You want me, I am going to China with these."

At that moment, another maid put her head in at the door. "Are you clean crazy, Gladys, gabbling away to yourself like that?"

But I did not care. I felt that God was making me move, and I was ready to obey. The bell rang; my mistress wanted me.

"I always pay the fares of my maids when I engage them. How much did you pay getting here?"

"It was two shillings and nine pence from Edmonton, madam."

"Then take this three shillings, and I hope you'll be happy here, Gladys."

"Thank you, madam."

So, in a few moments, my 2½d had increased by three shillings.

I worked on my days off in other houses as parlormaid, sometimes earning ten shillings or a pound for helping at a

*Two and a half pence, about two and a half cents U.S.

dinner. Sometimes I worked through the night at a society party and earned up to £2.10.* I saved it all.

I went to the shipping offices and inquired about the fare to China. Ninety pounds seemed to be the lowest until a clerk said, "If you want the cheapest, of course, it is the railway overland through Europe, Russia and Siberia."

I went to Muller's in the Haymarket. "How much will it cost for a single ticket to China?" I asked.

The booking clerk's eyes almost popped out.

"China! China, did you say? Now, come on, miss, we haven't time for jokes. What do you want?"

"I want to know how much it will cost for a single ticket on the railway to China."

"Well, I never! All right, I'll find out for you if you will call again in a day or two."

The ticket was to cost £47.10. from London to Tientsin, but I was strongly advised not to try it for there was fighting in Manchuria and there was no guarantee that I would ever get through.

"It's far too much of a risk," the clerk insisted.

"I'm the one who is taking the risk. Will you let me save for that ticket?"

I put three pounds down, and every time I saved a pound I took it to Muller's. At first, saving the fare had seemed almost an impossibility, but in the next few months strange things began to happen.

One day my mistress was going to a garden party with one of her society friends, but at the last moment the friend was ill and could not attend. My mistress sent for me and calmly

*About \$7.50.

announced, "Gladys, I want you to accompany me instead of my friend."

"But I can't go to a smart garden party."

"Why not?"

"Have you seen my best clothes?"

"Oh, if that is all, here is the key of my wardrobe. Help yourself to everything you need."

I was feminine enough to enjoy myself thoroughly that afternoon. Dressed from top to toe in clothes far better than anything I had ever worn before, I trotted around with my mistress, feeling quite at home.

When we returned, I was about to take off my borrowed finery, but my mistress said, "You looked very nice this afternoon. I want you to keep everything you have on."

So here I was, provided with clothes such as I could never have afforded myself, and I wore these until I went to China.

Thus in the autumn, because of many, almost miraculous little happenings like this one, instead of taking three years to save the fare, I had already paid the whole £47.10. at Muller's.

Now the question was where in China was I to go? It was about this time that a pastor called at my mother's house and enlisted my help in a campaign at his church. This was the first time I had ever done any real public work.

It was at one of these meetings that an old lady stopped me and said, "I'm interested in China too, because a friend of mine has a friend who has just gone back to that country. Her name is Mrs. Lawson. She is seventy-three and has been a missionary in China for years. She came home after her husband died, but could not settle, so she's gone out again

in spite of her age. Now she has written to my friend saying that she is praying earnestly that God will lay it on the heart of some young person to go out to China and carry on the work that she can only begin to do."

"That's meant for me, all right," I said, and immediately I set about seeking the friend who had the letter. I wrote to Mrs. Lawson, and after a long wait the reply came: "I will meet you at Tientsin if you can find your way out."

That settled it for me. The railway was to take me to Tientsin; Mrs. Lawson was to meet me there.

Then hasty packing began. My father insisted that I go home for a few days, and all of them did their best for me. Ivy Benson, a friend who also was a maid, gave me a badly needed suitcase, though it wasn't until long after that I discovered the anonymous gift came from her. My mother sewed secret pockets into my coat and in an old corselet for my tickets, passport, Bible, fountain pen, and two traveler's checks worth one pound each. Another friend gave me an old fur coat and, between them, the family fitted me out with warm clothes.

How good they were to me, I realize more fully now as I look back. How great was the sacrifice my parents were making in allowing their daughter to go off alone to a place thousands of miles away, knowing full well that in all probability they would never see her again. How much I have to thank them for, that they did not try to hold me back.

In my suitcase I had crackers, cookies, tins of corned beef, baked beans, fish, meat cubes, coffee essence, tea, and hard-boiled eggs. In an old army blanket I carried my other odds and ends, such as a few clothes, a bedroll, a teakettle, a sauce-

pan, and a small spirit stove which completed my equipment. I had no money to buy food on the way, so I intended to live on what I had with me. The suitcase was heavy, but at least it would grow lighter the farther I went.