

Gladys Has a Daring Escape

As much as Gladys had always enjoyed dramatic scenes, saying goodbye forever to her mum and her sister, Vi, at London's Liverpool Street train station had been almost too exciting. They thought they would see her again, but Gladys knew better. Once she got to China, that was it. She would make her life in China. She had given her mum an extra long hug and promised again she would write home as often as she could.

What a thrill she felt when the train gave off a huge chug, a powerful release of steam and a whistle blast to signal its departure. Now, huddled in a window seat with her two suitcases, Gladys tipped her foot on the pot and kettle she had tied to the handle of one suitcase to keep them from rattling together as the train jostled along. The "kettle" suitcase was crammed with food for her journey: tea and Ryvita, hard-boiled eggs, and fruitcake, the other, her few clothes, a blanket and an old fur coat someone had given her.

Hadn't God already proved to her that she was obeying His call? Imagine hearing about an old Scottish lady missionary in the remote north eastern part of China who needed an assistant! Hadn't God told her exactly where to go when she got to China?

The lovely English countryside in its autumn colours streamed past her window. It seemed no time until the train reached the English Channel and the special train that would be ferried across the water to Holland. From Holland, to Berlin, then on to the far-eastern port city of Vladivostok where she would begin what she thought of as her *real* journey on the Trans-Siberian Railroad to China.

“You go *where?*” The warmly dressed man with the heavy foreign accent had boarded the train in Warsaw. He looked at Gladys in disbelief. “All alone? And you go to China?”

Gladys nodded happily. “I change trains in Moscow to Vladivostok. ”

“You alone in Russia? No one help you? ”

Gladys smiled at the man’s concerned expression.

“It very bad in Russia. You know Revolution?”

Gladys knew that the Communists had taken over Russia a few years ago and that they didn’t believe in God.

“Yes, I know. I’m not staying in Russia. I’m going to China.”

“You hope.” The man shrugged before settling himself for sleep. “It very bad in Russia.”

Gladys felt the cold seeping in from the connecting doors of the train. As they moved slowly south and east across the vast reaches of Russia, snow deepened. The train was very cold and Gladys piled on her grey blanket and the old fur coat and huddled in the corner

of her seat against the window. She was glad for her little prima stove. She made many cups of hot tea and ate small meals of biscuits and cake. She read her Bible. She slept. She exercised by walking up and down the train corridor. She knew the Trans-Siberian Railroad was the longest railroad in the world and that she would traverse the whole almost ten thousand kilometres of track. Days passed. She lost track of time and when the train pulled into the last stop, Vladivostok, she was colder than she had ever been, stiff from days of sitting and hungry. And she was thrilled. From this place she would leave Russia and be on Chinese soil.

She was unprepared for the shocking scenes that confronted her as she disembarked from the train, dragging her two suitcases and wearing the old fur coat. Unkept soldiers were everywhere, the straps of their guns slung over their shoulders. Some gnawed on chunks of bread they carried with them. Grim-looking people packed the platforms, huddling on the ground, dark bunches of misery. The squalor was appalling. Refuse was littered everywhere. In long, seemingly endless lines people were crowded together waiting for bread. The roads were dangerously full of ice-filled holes and dirty snow.

As much as Gladys tried, she could find no one who spoke English and could direct her to her train. Finally two rough-looking soldiers approached her. Unable to understand their shouted demands, she offered her passport.

“British Citizen,” she insisted, pointing to the royal seal on the cover of her document. “British! To China! Train to China!”

The soldiers seized her passport picked up her suitcases and pushed her through and over the crowds. Men, women and children were squeezed together in every inch of space inside the station and outside for as far as she could see. At a small table in a side room the soldiers thrust Gladys into a chair and gave her passport to an untidy officer sitting at the table in his coat and hat against the bitter cold.

He studied the passport. “Ah, a machinist!”

Gladys was mystified. What could he mean?

“We need machinists in Russia! You stay! We give you good work.”

“I’m not a machinist!” Gladys felt tired and irritated. She mustn’t miss the train to China!

The officer pointed to her passport. On the line that stated her occupation, was the word “missionary.” His stubby finger tapped the word insistently. “Machinist! Machinist! You stay. You build revolution.”

“I am a British citizen. I am not a machinist. I must go to China! Where is the train to Harbin? Give me back my passport and my suitcases. *Train to China!*”

“No train to Harbin. Not possible. Line closed to Harbin. You stay here. Good place. Build revolution!”

“I will *certainly not* stay here! I paid for a ticket to Harbin. I must get to China!”

The officer gave a curt order to the soldiers who collected her belongings and hurried her out of the

room and onto a filthy street that ran along the back of the station. Each holding one of her arms, they pushed and lifted her along to a tumbledown hotel on the corner of the station road. Inside they gave the hotel clerk instructions before leading her to a room so small it contained only a bed. Dumping her suitcases and papers on the bed, they left.

Time seemed to have stopped. Only the fading light that sifted into the room marked the hours passing. Gladys was numb with fatigue and fear. She prayed but her prayers seemed to dwindle into nothing. She absolutely couldn't think what to do. There was no electric light and as night fell the room became black and very cold.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door so soft that Gladys was unsure if she heard anything or not. The knock came again just as quietly. As Gladys opened the door, a person pushed into the room and shut the door. In a heavily-accented English she heard, "Leave Moscow tonight. If you wait until morning, you will never leave. Gather your things and come. I will take you to a boat that is leaving for Japan. Hurry!" The voice seemed to come from a young woman.

Blindly, Gladys felt for her suitcases and passport. "Why are you helping me? Who are you?"

"Come. There is no time."

The hotel was in total darkness. Not even a candle burned in the lobby as the two rushed into the frozen street. The bitter cold bit into her lungs and Gladys

hobbled as fast as she could, her suitcases banging against her legs, gasping for breath as she ran.

They finally stopped at a dock. "There is the boat." The girl pointed to a small vessel.

"But I have no money," Gladys' lungs felt on fire.

"You are British. He will take you." The girl gave Gladys an urgent push. "Hurry!"

"How can I thank you?" Gladys pulled off her warm gloves. "Hear, please. Take these."

The girl grabbed the gloves. "Hurry!"

The girl had been right. The captain had looked at her passport and waved her on board. At first light, the boat moved slowly away from the shore toward its destination in Japan, but Gladys knew that God would guide her to China! Jubilantly, sitting cross-legged on the rocking deck, Gladys wrote of her escape to her parents.

"I thought I knew the value of prayer, but never as now. When everything seemed against me He was there ready to help over the difficult places and here I am safe and happy, just waiting to go on and would willingly go through it all again for the joy of knowing my Saviour as I know Him now!"

And Gladys would have much more to go through before the end of her journey.