

A London  
Sparrow



Phyllis Thompson

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Photo: Sunday Companion

Gladys Aylward





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## CHAPTER ONE

# The Parlourmaid

The telephone was ringing insistently, like an alarm clock, and the diminutive housemaid in her neat uniform and crisp white apron eyed it rather uneasily. A heavy aggressive-looking thing it was, standing there with the receiver hanging on a hook, trembling slightly now from the vibration of that continuous raucous clangour. She knew there was no-one else in the house but herself to lift the receiver, so she advanced determinedly towards it, held it to her ear, and shouted down the protruding nozzle,

“Hullo.”

A faint female voice at the other end of the line asked to speak to her mistress.

“She’s out,” said Gladys shortly.

“Oh. Well, will you tell her that I shan’t be able to come and see her after all,” said the voice, adding in explanation, “I’ve got scarlet fever.”

That was the end of the conversation, for Gladys slammed the receiver back on its hook and retreated rapidly. As she explained when relating the incident later, “I didn’t want her germs!”

There were plenty of family jokes in the Aylward home in Edmonton, and this was typical of them. It was just like “our Glad” to see an army of germs travelling at the same speed as sound along the telegraph wires and then leaping at her through the mouthpiece of the telephone!

Dad and Mum had long since recognised that their eldest child was not what might be called the brainy type. That report card covering her last four years at school had been revealing. Conduct and personal neatness were excellent from first to last, she “attacked her difficulties vigorously”, and was very much in earnest about her work. When it came to native talent however, her position in class told its own story. The nearest she ever got to the top was seventh and the farthest from it fifty-third, and that could not all be accounted for by absences due to bad health. Composition was good though writing poor, and there was an ever recurring reference to the weakness of her arithmetic.

What she lacked in intellectual attainments she made up for in doggedness and high spirits, and when she came home on her day off, the place hummed, for Mum had plenty to say, too. They’d talk and they’d laugh, and they’d mimic the people they’d met, sister Violet joining in, and then one of them would get irritable, and there would be a snappy retort, and laughter would turn to angry tears, and



the sparks would fly until they all subsided in sulky silence, and Dad, who was used to these scenes, would say quietly from his corner,

“Well, have you finished now?” and they’d smile sheepishly and everything would be all right again.

“All we Whiskins are a bit mad,” Mum used to say sometimes. She was a Whiskin before she married Dad, a thorough-going little Cockney with her ready wit and her love for bright colours and plenty of feathers in her hat, when hats had feathers in them. It was no wonder she had caught Dad’s eye in the Post Office where she worked and where, being a postman, he had to go and collect the registered letters. It was another of the family jokes, the way he’d been too shy to speak to her, so slipped a letter across the counter to her instead, asking if he could take her out for a walk. Two or three letters were slipped back and forth across the counter before she agreed to meet him, and then when she turned up, dressed as smart as you like, he wasn’t there—he was walking up and down on the pavement on the other side of the road, unable to pluck up the courage to cross over and speak to her! Well, he’d had to face the music next morning! Mum had fairly hissed at him, like an angry little cat with all its fur on end, demanding that he should give an account of his ungentlemanly behaviour, and then going on to tell him, in fluent and colourful language, the utter contempt with which she regarded him, until the sight of his woebegone face suddenly made her stop. They looked across the counter at each other in silence, then

she giggled and he laughed, and in the inexplicable way these things happen, the whole course of their lives was settled in that moment.

Everything was conducted in the accepted manner, of course. They started walking out, then became engaged, she cramming things into her bottom drawer while he saved for all he was worth, until on 8th April, 1900, they were married, and after a year or so in Bermondsey went to live in Edmonton, in the north of London.

It was here, on 24th February, 1902, that their first child was born. She was christened Gladys May, and when she was old enough they took her to church with them, sent her to Sunday School, and when she was fourteen found a job for her as assistant in the Penny Bazaar.

This was a highly exciting place, which had nothing on sale that cost more than a penny, but which nevertheless was able to display a great variety of articles, suitable for all sorts of uses, and Gladys announced triumphantly that she now saw how she could buy all her Christmas presents for sixpence. After a time she left the Penny Bazaar and went to serve in a grocer's shop. But then the men started returning from the First World War, wanting their jobs back, so although it meant leaving home Gladys had to go into service.

She did not stay anywhere for long. "Can't settle down," said Dad. "Never know when she'll be on the doorstep, come home again till she gets another job!" Eventually she found herself as a parlourmaid in the West End of London.

Domestic servants had a hard time of it in those days after the First World War, with long hours and small pay. But as far as Gladys was concerned she enjoyed life, especially in London where there were compensations which balanced the disadvantages. Wasn't she in the heart of the great city, with its lights and its theatres, its glimpses of gentlemen in long tails escorting bejewelled ladies in gleaming silks and satins, its cheerful sounds of music from the orchestras in the hotels and restaurants? There was the darker side of life, too, to stir the imagination with its pathos and its passion—little ragged children, tramps on the embankment sleeping under sheets of newspapers as the trams went clanging by, women with scarlet lips and faces heavy with powder standing at street corners when twilight descended. And there were the ordinary people thronging the streets, the good-natured, grumbling Londoners whom she knew and understood so well. She loved it all, the policemen on beat, the red pillar boxes, the newsvendors, the mothers pushing prams and the buses rumbling by.

And she liked being so near to the theatres. You could get in for a few pence if you queued up for the cheap seats.

"I'll take you to Drury Lane on Saturday," she would say to Queenie. Queenie was her cousin, and lived in Fulham, not far from where she was working, and as the little schoolgirl's mother had died, Gladys felt sorry for her, and often took her out. Breathlessly, heads pushed forward, they followed the anguished but musical adventures of beautiful, innocent blondes whose torments usually had