

## THE ROAD TO NAB END – Chapter Twenty One

In 1930 half the workers of Blackburn were on the streets. The entire output of the Lancashire textile industry had been halved since 1914. Because it depended upon the export trade, our town was hardest hit. The number of workers in the mills in 1930 had shrunk to a tenth of what it had been before the war.

The poor were not only going hungry; they were pawning their bedding for a meal. Some of them finished up on straw and sacking, their ‘bed of sorrows.’

A diet of fish-head soup and haddock was all that kept many of them going. The medical journal, *The Lancet*, reported that people in the depressed areas of Blackburn were literally dying of starvation. The birth rate declined; the infant mortality rate was higher in Lancashire than in the rest of the country. The maternal mortality rate rose. Things must have been desperate because the money lenders thrived.

Sickness wasn’t feared for sickness’ sake, but because of the threat of destitution.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1932, there were pitched battles between unemployed workers and the police in London, Manchester, Birkenhead and Glasgow. In Belfast demonstrators had been shot and killed. In Rochdale the army had been called out. In desperation, the unemployed decided to make a direct appeal for help to parliament and the king.

In the fading light of a wintry afternoon, I watched a column of ragged hunger marchers form up to begin the long trek from Blackburn to London. I had joined the crowd in the town square to give them a send-off. They were joined by a small group from Jarrow, which had missed the main Northumberland, Durham and Teesside contingent, going south through Yorkshire.

They’d never been so far from home. The idea of going to London fired them up. The Blackburn people gave the Jarrow marchers wedges of bread, steaming tea and tator-hash. In the late afternoon, they formed up together. With their heavy boots and laced-up clogs ringing on the cobblestones, the marchers moved off.

‘Good luck!’ we shouted.

After little more than a month they were back, thinner than ever. London had wanted to get rid of them and had sent them home by train. We greeted them at the station and heard their story.

In London they had repeatedly been run down by the mounted police. It had been like a battlefield. They hadn’t seen the king, or Ramsay MacDonald the Labour prime minister. They’d been fobbed off at every turn.

Blackburn was a town that at one time had clothed much of the world; yet in the worst years of the depression we didn't have enough clothing to cover our backs. As Gracie Fields, our Lancashire comedienne used to say, 'It's so bad, luv, laughing is all that's left.' Little wonder that I should have decided to try my luck elsewhere. As things got worse and worse, I finally made up my mind to leave.