

THE ROAD TO NAB END – Chapter Seventeen – Part 1

Father was never sure what surprise mother would spring on him next. As mother handled the money, the only thing about which he could be fairly certain was that she would pay the rent. Rent was sacred. If you didn't pay it, you finished up in the street. Every Friday night, before any other spending was done, three shining half-crowns (seven shillings and sixpence) were placed in a little coffin-shaped box that hung on a nail behind the front door. I'd reach up and shake the box to make quite sure the money was there. It made me feel better when I heard the coins clinking.

The rent was collected every Saturday afternoon by a burly, red-faced chap who burst into the house from the street. He never knocked, he never took off his cap and he rarely spoke. When he did, he was surly and abrupt. If you said that the roof leaked, and would he please ask the landlord to fix it, he'd give a grunt and leave. Complaints got us nowhere. Most times he simply pocketed the three coins, made an entry in the blue, penny rent-book that stuck out of the box and left. We feared the rent collector; we also despised him. The dislike we felt for our landlord, who was unknown to us, we turned on to him.

There were occasions when mother's romantic nature caused her to violate the all-important rent-rule. The danger signals were a penitent look on her face or new hats on my sisters' heads. When she had money, she spent her last penny on dressing up her children. I knew from the growing tension in the house as the time for the rent collector's visit approached, that the rent had gone.

The first occasion when the coins didn't roll into the collector's hand, he stood on the doormat, clutching the empty box, an incredulous look on his face. I was hypnotized. Mother, who believed in miracles, kept her eyes glued to the box. She wouldn't have been the least surprised to see a little bird fly in and three shining coins roll out. Finally, the collector threw the rent-book down.

'Well, tha knows what it means, three times and ye're oot,'

He slammed the door behind him so hard that mother's punch bowl tinkled.

My parents feared the rent collector because of the power he wielded. He could not only put us in the street, he could ruin our credit. What the bank-book was to the toffs, the rent-book was to the working class. A rent-book without any red entries meant that you could get a loan from a moneylender, or do business with the pawnbroker. It gave the poor respectability as nothing else did. A 'clean' rent-book without delinquencies could be the difference between eating and going hungry.