

## The Road to Nab End

### Chapter Four

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

When I was five and my brother Dan was nine, he confided to me that he was not going hungry any more. We were going to steal food together. His plan was simple. On the first really dark night he'd push me through the window above Tom Tat's grocery shop door. The window was always left slightly ajar. I was to jump down inside the shop and open the door, so that we could help ourselves. 'What could be easier?'

'But that's stealing,' I said.

'It's not. It's the toffs that steal from us. This is taking what's ours.'

'Tom Tat isn't a toff; he's like us.'

'Ye're a coward,' Dan hissed. 'Ye're a yellow belly. If ye don't join me I'll eat yer liver. If ye tell anyone, I'll drown thee in t'canal.'

The next Sunday night was pitch dark. Our parents were out. Only my sister and her boyfriend Gordon Weall were in the house. I'd always liked Gordon, he was a cheery sort of fellow.

'Come on!' ordered Dan, making for the door.

I was on the point of making a desperate last-minute appeal to Jenny and Gordon; instead I slunk after my brother into the dark night.

Two minutes later we were in the shop doorway. Dan took a look up and down the empty street. All was quiet at the Tat's house next to the shop.

'Quick!' Dan ordered, offering me his back. Although I was choking with fear, I knew what to do; we'd practiced it a dozen times. I also knew from staring at them in the daytime where the lock and the two bolts were at the other side of the door. I'd made up my mind that once I'd opened the door, I'd grab my clogs and run.

I put my stockinged feet on his shoulders; he hoisted me up to the window. Reaching up, I silently pushed the window inward. Still resting on Dan's shoulders, I gingerly began to get my head and shoulders through the opening. My weight now rested on the sill. All that remained was for me to draw back the top bolt, wriggle through the open window, and drop to the floor. I could smell cheese, but couldn't see it.

'Haste!' Dan whispered impatiently. 'What are ye making?'

'I'm stuck.'

'Stuck? Get through!'

'I can't, I'm wedged.'

'You've got to.' He reached up and pushed the soles of my feet as hard as he could.

'I can't,' I repeated, my head swimming. 'Pull me back. I'm choking.' My body trembled; beads of sweat blinded me.

After hesitating, Dan jumped up and hung onto my feet. The pain was awful. I thought he was going to pull my legs out of joint.

'Ouch, stop it!' Dan pulled harder. My body didn't budge.

'Ouch! Ouch!' I sobbed.

'Shut yer gob!' Moments later, I heard his clogs echoing down the street. He had deserted me.

Turning and twisting, I made one last panic-stricken effort to break free. I expected Tom Tat to come shouting out of his house at any moment.

The next thing I knew, Gordon was standing on a small stool. He had me by the calves.

'Shush Billy,' he whispered as he undid the knot in my clothing and gently eased me free. Once he had me out of the window, the three of us ran home, double-quick.

That night I lay in bed quaking. I swore I'd never do anything for my brother again.

While Gordon and Jenny gave Dan a piece of their mind, they said nothing to father for I heard no more of it. I wonder what the Tats said when they found their window wide open the next morning. It didn't stay ajar anymore.

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### Chapter Five

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

Deep poverty introduced a degree of deep fear into the house. Mother worried where the next meal was coming from. We all worried about it. We went to bed hungry and slept badly.

I woke from a troubled sleep early one morning to see father going downstairs. For some reason, I crept after him. My brother and sisters were still asleep. By the time I reached the bottom step, father's dishevelled figure was crouched before the kitchen fire. There was a tweedy smell of peat. Although the fire had been banked up all night, the house was bitterly cold. As I drew my flannel shirt closer to my body, my feet froze on the sanded floor.

Father was holding something, which he was wiping with a towel. It looked like a white doll; but the doll had blood on it. Father's shadowy figure danced on the kitchen wall.

'Cum now, cum now,' he muttered.

I knew something was wrong. Mother had been crying in the night. Father had been downstairs several times. I had no idea that a life and death struggle had been going on; even less where the baby had come from. I had by now made up my mind that it was a baby not a doll that father was holding. I found it hard to believe that the baby had come out of the bedroom. I'd been told that storks brought them. Jenny had said they were found under flowers; Brenda, my elder sister, believed they arrived in Dr Grieves' bag. While I watched, I heard Dougdale's factory hooter at the end of the street. I also heard t' knocker-up man coming down the row.

'Tell t' knocker-up we're awake' father ordered. He had not failed to see me standing in the shadows.

'Yes, Dadda.' I slipped on my clogs, which were kept at the foot of the stairs, and ran to the street door. Having turned the key, I opened the door long enough to yell into the wind; 'We're up.' Mr Smalley waved his rod and turned away.

By the time I got back to the kitchen, the gas lamp had been lit. It hissed reproachfully. A little wasted thing with a monkey's face lay on one of the rocking chairs. Father was standing with his back to the fire, looking at it dejectedly. 'E's a goner,' he murmured. I knew that a 'goner' meant that the baby was dead. Confused, a cold shiver running down my back, I crept away.

Father didn't go to the mill that day. Nor did mother; she stayed in bed. During the morning Dr Grieves drove up with his horse and gig, followed by his brown and white spaniel, Joy.

That afternoon, the dead baby with the monkey's face was placed into a plain box of undressed pine. Until evening the coffin stood on top of the folded sewing machine under the front window. The paper blind had been pulled down. The aspidistra that usually stood there had been placed on the floor. I tried to look into the box but the lid

was nailed down.

That evening, Grandmother Bridget lifted the latch and came in. Mrs Morgan also arrived. There was a loud whispering with mother upstairs. Mrs Fothergill, a woman dressed in black who cared for the chapel, kept on at father about sprinklin'.

'You know what happens to an unsprinkled soul.'

I'm sure that sprinklin', Mrs Fothergill's term for a christening, never entered my father's head. He didn't sprinkle my brother while I was there.

The glances and whisperings that went on made me think that the grown-ups were hiding something. They seemed furtive. No one could tell me what had happened to my brother except that he'd 'died.'

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### Chapter Six

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

On my first day at school, aged four, my eldest sister Brenda took me by the hand and left me in my classroom. Our caps and coats hung on hooks on the walls. Because of the occasional outbreak of head lice, Brenda had told me to keep my cap separate from the others. I think I was smaller than most of my companions, and I was afraid. I had good reason to be.

I discovered that my schoolmates were a wild lot. Newcomers were roughed up by bullies who ran in a pack. No sooner had I got into the schoolyard for the morning break than several bullies knocked me down. I expected my brother to defend me. He didn't, although he was quick with his fists. His walking away from me on that occasion coloured my view of him for the rest of my life. As I was small, I tried to seize their legs and topple them. One or two kicks in the face with steel-capped clogs put a stop to that. By then, with stars dancing before my eyes, I didn't know where I was, or where the school was. In a blind, crying rage all I could do was to hang on to one of my opponents and, in a tangle and a tussle, have the wind knocked out of me. Every time I broke free and managed to get to my feet, weeping and gasping for breath, I was thrown down again.

Only when my face was covered with blood was I allowed to scramble through the pack and run in search of my sister Brenda, who I knew was playing in the girl's yard next door. She was horrified when she saw my swollen lips and puffed-up face. 'I'll murder them for this, Billy,' she hissed as she took me home. I must have been a ghastly sight when my parents came home that night. Mother was shocked. 'Tha's been at it again,' was father's only comment.

Back to school I went the next day.

A week or so later, before my wounds had healed, three bullies grabbed me in the playground again. My earlier terror was renewed. At first I managed to break away, but they recaptured me and dragged me down. At that moment a fury landed in our midst. It was Brenda. 'I'll show you,' she shouted, 'hurting our Billy! Take that . . . and that . . . and that!' Like a wild animal she rained blows upon them until they pleaded for mercy. They got none. Everybody in the school yard was deeply impressed with Brenda. Henceforth, as long as I stayed at St Philip's, I may not have been popular, but at least no one dreamt of touching me again.

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### Chapter Seven

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

Between the ages of six and ten, I was helped in my schoolwork by my sister Brenda. Not only at her best in tough spots, she was also highly intelligent. Other than father, she was the only one among us who could handle arithmetic. It mystified us how Brenda could order figures about the way she did. No matter how many she wrote down, they did exactly what she told them to do.

‘You see how easy it is, Billy,’ she said, arranging the figures as she wanted them. The moment I touched them they stampeded in every direction.

‘What on earth are you doing, Billy,’ Brenda said, taking over. ‘You’ve made a dreadful hash of it. It’s quite simple, really.’ The annoying thing was that she didn’t seem to try.

To everyone’s surprise, she topped the state examinations for eleven-year-olds in the county. She did it without a book in the house and without special coaching. It was a real miracle. Her name was in the newspaper. Jenny, the younger of my two sisters, showed it to me. It was the first time I’d seen our name in print and it had quite an effect on me. It made me giddy. The next day I expected everyone to stop me in the street and ask me if I was the brother of the girl whose name was in the paper, and who was going to go to the Grammar School in Preston. Nobody did. I became so disappointed that I stopped a number of people to tell them that I was Brenda’s brother. I told them how she had won a scholarship to go to a special school for girls at Preston, ten miles away. She was going to ride the train there and back every day without paying. Nobody seemed impressed.

After several days a letter arrived from the school board about Brenda. I heard my parents discussing it in the kitchen.

‘Uniforms, including stockings are provided,’ said father studying a list. ‘Train fare as well,’ he continued. ‘And books and pencils.’

‘Well, imagine that,’ said mother, ‘I reckon they must have money cumin’ out of their ears.’ There was a pause.

‘What’s it say about shoes?’ asked mother. ‘Lass can’t go to college in clogs.’

‘Nothing,’ said father, ‘nothing.’

‘It must . . . look again.’

‘Mm, aye, tha reet, Maggie, it does. It says that shoes will be black, of plain design, and of good quality.’ A still longer pause.

‘Where wa’ it t’ come fra?’ mother asked. ‘Her feet have long outgrown what shoes she had.’

‘Well, we can borrow money to buy shoes, or we can leave her where she is,’ father said finally. ‘We might be making a fuss about nothing, Maggie. It’s not good to put big ideas into young people’s heads. What use is there in this learning when she could be doing real work?’

Although I was very young I knew that something was wrong. I wanted to shout through the cracks beneath my bed, 'Brenda's name was in the paper! You can't stop her going to Preston because she hasn't got shoes.'

But I didn't shout. Nobody did. Brenda didn't go to Preston. One night when she came back from the lending library, I heard father tell her that they couldn't send her to school because she didn't have shoes, and they couldn't afford to buy them. Brenda didn't throw a fit, which is what I wanted her to do. Apart from a mumbled word or two, she accepted their decision. The matter was never discussed again. A brilliant career was denied her.

I think father was to blame. The truth is he wasn't interested in education. It didn't matter in our lives, spinning and weaving did. The mills were our destiny. Instead of going on to higher education, Brenda entered the mill at twelve as a half-timer. She became a piecer, an assistant to a spinner. She went on to join the Salvation Army at seventeen and set about attacking sin as fiercely as she had attacked the bullies at school. On her wedding day to fellow Salvationist Harry Entwistle, his wife turned up declaring him a married man. Brenda never wore the Salvation Army uniform again. In time, she married a good man called Richard Paden. Like my sister Jenny and most other workers who had little to eat, they only had one child. Somehow, Brenda and Richard weathered the hard times.

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### Chapter Eight

My name is Billy. As the son of a Catholic mother and a Protestant father, my schooling in the Blackburn of the 1920s was a sometimes confusing affair.

Sister Loyola never let the Woodruff children forget that we had come from St Philip's, the Anglican school. She was wary of us on that score. 'All Protestants are heretics,' she repeated with a dark look that went right through me. In her eyes, we were lucky to have made the change from St Philip's to St Peter's, the Catholic school.

One day Miss Little sent me with a message to another teacher. On route, I looked down the massive banisters of the main staircase and saw that there wasn't a soul in sight. I threw myself headfirst onto the banister and shot down toward the ground floor. I arrived at the feet of Sister Loyola. There was no mistaking the shiny black shoes, the black gown with its black rosary hanging from waist to knees, and the wooden cross swinging pendulum-like before my eyes.

While she held me with her cold eyes, I wished I might fall through a crack. I was so frightened that I could neither move nor breathe.

'Don't you know it is forbidden to slide down the banister?'

'Yes,' I stammered. My lips and tongue felt dry.

'So you have done it wilfully?'

'Yes,' I faltered; yet I felt no remorse.

Before I could escape, she had grabbed me by the ear and was dragging me back up the stairs to my classroom. She twisted my ear so savagely that she made me cry. The moment Miss Little saw Sister Loyola she took off her specs. 'Oh, dear,' she said. Miss Little did not like violence. If she was forced to punish us, she did so reluctantly and with a light hand. For this she was respected.

'Stop what you're doing!' Sister Loyola ordered the class, 'I am about to make an example of someone who wilfully disobeys school regulations. Your cane!' she demanded of Miss Little.

'Oh dear,' Miss Little repeated, adjusting her pince-nez.

Sister Loyola tested the rod, bending it with her hands. Then to get the feel of the cane, she struck the air several times. Whoosh, whoosh.

'Put up your hand!' she ordered. Her pale face had reddened. Her lips were set in a hard strength of will.

I raised one of my arms, offering my palm.

'Higher!' she ordered, lifting the hand with the tip of the cane.

I waited, biting my lip.

Suddenly she brought the stick down across my palm and fingers with all her strength. I stifled a howl. She cut me five more times on that hand, each cut worse than the last. I saw and felt the red weals. A shocked Miss Little stood there, hand over her mouth.

Breathing heavily, Sister Loyola demanded the other hand.

'No!' I screamed 'No!' Three cuts were the usual punishment. I'd already had six. Sister Loyola reacted as if I'd struck her across the face. There was a murmur from the class.

'You wicked, wicked boy!' she called threatening me with her stick.

'No!' I repeated defiantly. Shaking with anger and shamed before the class, I felt rebellious, even violent. Before Sister Loyola could recover from her surprise, I lunged forward, struggled with her, and wrenched the cane out of her hand. I then rushed to the open window and flung it into the street. Avoiding Sister Loyola's outstretched hands, I ran from the room. I left my cap and coat behind; I didn't stop running until I reached my mother in the mill. Between tending the clattering machines, she heard me out.

'So much for St Peter's,' she said, doffing another can of cotton.

And as simply as that, it was back to St Philips, the Anglican school. I did care about how my street friends would take this crossing of religious boundaries. Fortunately, they ignored it.

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### Chapter Nine

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

From the age of ten onward, school was incidental. I was up at five to deliver newspapers. I got to school as the bell rang. From nine until eleven-forty-five I dozed; worse still, I think I slept. At eleven-forty-five the teacher gave me a signal, and I ran from school to deliver my family's dinners in the mills. The meal, a stew of meat, potatoes and vegetables, had been cooked by mother the night before, filled into basins, and taken to work in the morning. They were left on a large stove in the mill warehouse. Before noon the basins were hotted up, hence the name hot-pot. My family could have collected their own dinners, but they had other things to do and they were exhausted from having been on their feet for the past four hours. Besides, children were expected to help. I had to move quickly because, as spinners, my sisters did not work in the same mill as my parents. If there were groups of workers standing or squatting against the mill walls when I arrived, I knew I was late.

I collected the dinners from the stove where my family had placed them. I had a knack of distinguishing our basins from scores of others, because ours had a pretty pattern. One day however, mother put father's hot-pot in a mud-brown basin. As it was the same as some of the others, I ran off with somebody else's bowl. The way the fellow chased after me through the factory, bawling out that I'd pinched his dinner, you might have thought that his life was at stake. Losing one's dinner was a serious matter.

I ran with each basin in my cap because it was scalding hot. I first went to father, then Jenny, then Brenda. Speed was essential; nobody wanted a cold-pot, not even Jenny and Brenda who seemed to be lathered with sweat from the heat and humidity of the spinning-room. Once I tripped and fell carrying father's dinner. It spilled into my cap: meat, potatoes, carrots, peas, gravy, the lot. All I could do was to scoop it out of my hat back into the bowl and say nothing. He never noticed, but my hat smelled for days. The last two basins were for mother and me. We ate our dinner balancing ourselves on an overturned round sliver can, our backs wedged against the whitewashed wall. We had to cover the hot-pot from the fine dust that fell like a gentle rain. It wasn't difficult to know when the dinner hour was done. Precisely at one, somebody threw a lever, and with a creak, crack, thump and clatter the whole room began to tremble and shake. Once the machinery became alive and the myriad wheels began to turn, you either jumped up smartly and set about your business, or you found yourself in trouble. The machine was the boss, it wouldn't wait, and it took no excuses. Glad to escape the din, I raced back to school. From one-thirty to four I must have dozed again. After four I ran the streets with the evening edition of the local newspaper. Then I came home and ran errands.

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### Chapter Ten

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

I think the years from the early twenties to the mid-thirties were rather like Lancashire weather: generally awful, with bright periods. One such bright period occurred when my parents suddenly decided to take us to Blackpool. It must have been in 1924 or 1925, when the textile industry had made a partial recovery from the crash of 1920. Otherwise we wouldn't have had the money.

We went during Wake's Week, a traditional holiday originally linked with the Church. Each cotton town had its own particular Wake's Week when everything was shut down and the workers escaped to the hills or the sea. Mother slipped me a coin to buy a new bucket and spade. The family's one and only straw valise was got out and filled with food. As the price of food at Blackpool was too high, we took bread, oats, a large can of Lyle's syrup, margarine, cans of milk, fish and pineapple chunks, tea, sugar, eggs marked with our name, a jar of jam, a jar of piccalilli relish, salt and sauce. We climbed aboard the train, which was an excursion train and packed. It was good humour all the way. Everybody had broken loose. If anybody had talked about cotton on that train he'd have been thrown out onto the track.

On arrival in Blackpool we were told to rush past the ticket barrier. Only mother and father had tickets. 'If you're caught, act daft,' father said. Following Dan and my sisters, I dashed past the ticket collectors. They paid no attention to us.

From the station we walked to a lodging house in the back streets. Father paid for a week on arrival. The family shared one bedroom. There were lots of other Blackburn children in the house with whom we could play.

We abandoned our parents on arrival and only joined them for meals. Sitting on benches, in sand-streaked bathing suits, we ate twice a day with all the other families in a large room downstairs. Everybody squeezed in where they could. We'd come from the same town, some from the same street. There wasn't a sad face among us. The dining-room table and benches rocked with laughter. Every meal was a joyful shouting match.

Aside from the smells and the queuing for the toilet, everything was bliss. In the dining room the landlady's word was law; nobody answered back. She was skilled at her job, and knew how to get us out of the house when she wanted to. The only subdued person there was the landlady's husband who seemed to do most of the work. We spent our time on the beach or paddling in the sea. What the adults did was their business. A week later, with long faces, and our mouths stuffed with 'Blackpool Rock,' we caught the train home. Our week of make-believe was over. After Blackpool, the Blackburn air hung like lead.

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### Chapter Eleven

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

One day I was allowed to go on my own to a children's matinee of R. L. Stephenson's *Treasure Island*. Somehow I'd got two pennies to pay my way into the gods. From up there it was like looking down into a magic kingdom.

The floodlit world of the theatre was far more real than reality to us. We entered into it, took part in it, even to the extent of shouting warnings to the heroine and hissing the villain. The audience in the gods was completely uninhibited. 'Bloody scoundrel thi are, knocking t' lass about like that,' somebody bawled. If we shouted too much, someone else yelled 'Shut thi gob!'

The trouble with some people is that they went on nursing their grievances long after the play was over. They stood outside the stage door and hissed the actors they didn't like as they left. The villain – however striking – had to watch his step when returning to his lodgings. 'Ah could teach thee a lesson or two,' they called after him. 'A thorough bad un thi are.'

But it was different for me. No man has ever frightened me as much as Long John Silver did. When it was over I rushed into the street and grabbed the first person I saw – a nice old gentleman – to tell him all about it.

'I want to warn you against Lon John Silver. He's treacherous. He'll stop at nothing.' The old man must have understood children. He rested himself on his walking stick and, with a benign look, and the odd 'Well!' or 'You don't say,' heard me out. He seemed as revolted by the treachery of Long John as I.

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### Chapter Twelve

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

As we grew older, we boys took to chasing each other in and out of the town's clay pits, fighting each other with clay balls. Oblivious of danger, we also chased each other across single-line railway bridges where it was strictly forbidden to go. One winter day, three friends and I were caught on such a bridge. A coal train was upon us before we knew it, swaying toward us at an alarming speed, puffing blue smoke. We knew that the only safety bay was farther on, beyond our reach. It was too late to run back; the track was frozen and slippery. Terrified, we scrambled over a metal screen and, fully dressed, jumped into the icy canal – that is, all except Wilfred Green. The last thing I saw before plunging into the freezing water was Wilfred fleeing before the train. Numb from the cold, I heard the train thunder past above my head.

Our teeth chattering, our lips turning blue, we lay on the bank for several minutes gasping for breath.

'We'd better find out where Wilf's got to,' one of us said.

We clambered up the steep bank until we reached the track. Wilf Green had disappeared. Shivering with cold, we began to walk back across the bridge, puzzled where he'd got to.

We found a lumpy object at the end of the bridge. It was Wilf. He was lying on his belly, at the side of the track. He didn't look like Wilf Green anymore; not the Wilf Green who always came out on top of our fights. He looked like a crumpled, blood-stained sack tossed out of the train. His legs had been severed at the knees.

Speechless, we stood and stared. We had the wind up too much to touch him. Instead, we backed away and fled across the bridge to a signal box. Breathlessly, we told the man in the box what had happened, then we all ran home slantwise across the fields. For a long time Wilfred Green's life hung in the balance. Youth, to say nothing of medical care, pulled him through. In time he was fitted with false legs with which he began life anew. In the hospital, and in the streets later on, he avoided those of us who had been with him when he lost his legs. He wasn't blaming us – at least I don't think so – it was just that he'd begun a new life, which for reasons that he knew best, he didn't want to share with us. Mother said his pride was at stake.

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### Chapter Thirteen

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

The long summer school holiday was the period of greatest freedom. Relieved of hot-pot running duties, we fled the factories and the smoking chimneys for the hills. Girls and boys went together. Our parents didn't bother that we might get lost, or drowned, or gored by a bull, or fall out of a tree, or break our necks. Children were not the focus of their lives, work was. With a little food in our pockets and accompanied by birdsong, in a straggling band, we ranged the countryside from morning to night, getting hotter as the day wore on. We robbed birds' nests, mimicked bird calls, plucked berries, chased butterflies, fished, rabbited, skimmed pebbles across the water, and ran down the turf-clad banks to swim in the Ribble, at one time the boundary between England and Scotland.

All summer long, we ran as free as the wind. Provided we closed all farm gates behind us and didn't interfere with the grazing cattle and sheep, we were free to follow a path or a rushing stream wherever it led. Late in the afternoons, we would look in at a farmhouse to watch them milk. I thought the way the milk squirted from the udders into the pail was magical. I loved the sloshing of milk from one pail to another. To be given a mug of warm milk with cream on top, whose sweet smell was equal to its taste, was to know what paradise was all about.

The only authority we recognized was that of the older children, if the oldest was a girl, she ruled; it was her job to bring us home safely. In town each child was responsible for its own acts; when roving the countryside we acted as a group. You kept the rules or you didn't go next time.

Before dark we'd be home again, achingly hungry, with grazed knees and elbows, and perhaps a sunburn. We brought with us bundles of nettles for nettle-beer, cresses and docks; armfuls of flowers; and stained linen bags filled with berries.

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### Chapter Fourteen

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

My career as a Wolf Cub Scout was unfortunately short-lived. I had a lot to prove, to compensate for my stained cap, patched pants and torn jersey. I loved every minute I spent with the Scouts. I'd joined them not because my parents said I should, but because scouting seemed to me such a good idea. It was what I was looking for. I loved the knot-tying, the First Aid and all the rest. I really believed in it.

I competed in a fire lighting contest on an island in the Ribble, in the pouring rain. When the signal to begin was given, I ransacked the island for dry twigs and wet grass. I had lit a fire in the rain before and I knew to start with dead leaves. Until the fire got going, I protected it with my cap. My fire was crackling and sending up clouds of sparks before any of the others were lit. I'd used only one of the two matches we'd been given. I must say, the Scout Master didn't like it when I handed him the other match back. I won because I was determined to win. I wanted to show them that my clothes had nothing to do with being the best Cub Scout.

My nemesis was the Scout master's mother who used to attend our meetings in St Alban's Church Hall at the other side of town. There was no Scout troop at St Peter's or St Philip's. She and I didn't hit it off. She was always tidying me up, which I resented. She didn't have to keep saying how odd I looked in my ragamuffin outfit. I was tired of her treating me as an ugly duckling. It irked me so. She made it plain that I just didn't fit in, and the sooner I left the better. I suppose I'd jumped into the wrong pond.

'Oh?' was all my parents said when I asked them to buy a scout uniform 'Oh?' I did raise tenpence to purchase the Scout necktie and a leather-studded fastener, but that wasn't good enough. I was issued an ultimatum by the serious young man who led us: 'Cub Scout cap and a uniform, or out!'

I was sad and humiliated when they threw me out. I just didn't feel it was fair, especially as I was enjoying it, and I had won the firelighting contest. 'Oh,' was all my parents said when I told them that I no longer was a Cub Scout 'Oh.'

For a long time afterward when moving about the town, I followed my troop's way of alternating running with walking. Run a hundred steps, walk a hundred steps, and so on. It made me feel that I was still part of the group.