

THE ROAD TO NAB END – Chapter Seventeen – Part 3

We moved from Griffin Street to Livingstone Road one Friday after midnight. We used a flat-topped handcart with iron-shod wheels, which father had hired overnight for one shilling. Onto the cart we piled three beds and bedding, pisspots, four broken rocking chairs, four stools, a stand chair, a bench, a rough table and pots and pans. Personal belongings and clothing were packed in straw valises. All was tied down.

We took the rent-book with us. We also took the seven-and-sixpence. All we left in the little box behind the door was the key. Late as it was, Gordon Weall, my sister's intended, gave us fits pretending to be the rent collector, taking down the empty box the next day. He took off the collector to a T. Despite his clowning, it took little more than an hour in which to load the cart and make ready to leave. Other than turning off the gas, and taking the penny asbestos gas mantle from the kitchen, there was not much else to bother about. Anyway, gas came at a penny a time and our penny's worth was almost done.

Father was the last out. He didn't look back. Having spat on his hands, he got between the shafts and began to push the cart along the cobbled street. I ran behind to ensure that nothing fell off the cart and was lost.

Despite the clatter, no neighbours' curtains moved. They knew perfectly well what was going on and deliberately kept out of the way. Without blinking, they could tell the rent collector the next day that they had no idea that the Woodruffs had gone. As for the police, they didn't interfere with moonlight flits.

This was the first move in my life. It was a cold starlit night. I was ten at the time. It gave me a glorious feeling.

It took less than an hour to get the cart up the hills to Livingstone Road. Mother and my sister awaited us. They had lit the fires and were quick to give us a hand. To celebrate, we had hot tea on arrival. We hugged each other at our triumph, all talking at once.

'We've done it!' we laughed.

I woke the next morning for the first time in a room of my own. It smelled of fresh paint. I couldn't get used to the space and the amount of light. Going downstairs was like entering a ballroom. I was amazed at the distance between things. I found mother making breakfast and singing. She was in high spirits.

'You see, ' she said, 'it can be done.'

She'd won. She wasn't going back to squalor anymore. With breakfast burning on the stove, she dragged everyone into Jenny's part of the house to look at the distant, sun-lit hills.

'Look, look,' she cried, pointing through the large bay windows:

‘Did you ever see anything so beautiful?’

The sun was streaming in.

There was no stopping mother now. Unknown to us, and despite her promise to father, she was planning further shocks. We came home one night to find the house transformed into a palace. There were rugs on the floors, curtains instead of newspapers on the windows and furniture in every room. Father nearly fell down when he limped in from work. With a stunned look on his face, he went from room to room, his eyes getting larger and larger.

‘Maggie, lass,’ he asked in a funny quaking voice, ‘where did you get all this stuff?’

The awful truth came out. She’d gone shopping for one or two little items and met ‘such a nice man’. He’d persuaded her that it was cheaper to hire furniture. He told her that buying furniture was out of date. For just a few shillings a week they could live as they ought to live.

‘But you promised...’ father stammered.

‘I didn’t promise I wouldn’t get a chair to sit on,’ mother shot back. ‘I promised I wouldn’t get any more fancy houses. And I ‘aven’t.’