

THE ROAD TO NAB END – Chapter Nineteen

Some months after we'd moved to Livingstone Road, I started delivering papers. I was paid the princely sum of two shillings and sixpence, of which I kept a dodger. Mother took the rest. That was my contribution to help pay for the house.

One day whilst delivering papers, I found a collie dog. Well, really, she found me. She came from nowhere and adopted me on the spot. In a transport of joy, she suddenly leapt all over me, licking and fussing me. She was black and white, with bright eyes and the most beautifully shaped head. She bestowed herself upon me there and then, as if she'd been looking for me all her life. We became inseparable companions. I called her Bess. Morning till night, we were never apart.

Although she was allowed in the house, she was not allowed to go upstairs. Every morning she greeted me by the kitchen fire, writhing and leaping around as if I'd been absent for months. She ran through the streets delivering papers with me. She slunk onto the tram with me and knew where I had to get off, and where we had to deliver. When I had to go to school or inside the mills, she waited for me outside. No one could have had a more loving companion.

I paid no attention to my family's complaints that she smelled. Nor did I listen when they said that there was no room or food for her. Together, Bess and I overcame all opposition, solved all problems.

One day when we reached home, a big red-faced farmer with black leggings and a check cap was waiting for us. He had a collar and a leash in his hand. His angry mottled brown eyes spelled trouble.

'Tha's cummin' with me,' the farmer said to the dog.

I was horrified. I got as far away from the man as I could and clung to Bess in a corner.

'Doesn't tha know that stealin's a sin?' he asked me with an unblinking stare.

'Tha'll finish up in jail, tha will. And then, by gum, tha'll go to 'ell.'

Bess and I trembled. Her head was down, her tail tucked in.

'What dus t' think a dog like this costs?'

'I don't know.' I said, shaking.

Bess and I clung closer still. I could feel her heart thumping; she was as terrified as I was.

'Well, if I'd got nothing better to do, I'd tell thee. As it is, I'll just take me dog and go.'

The farmer reached across and grabbed Bess by the neck. With Bess squirming to be free, he put the collar on her. He then attached the leash and began to drag the dog across the floor to the door. I didn't know what to do. Father just sat there as if nothing was happening. So I burst into

tears. I sobbed as if my heart would break.

‘You can’t take Bess away from me,’ I spluttered. ‘She’s the only thing I’ve got.’ Over her shoulder, Bess pleaded for my help. I cried harder. Much harder.

The man stopped at the door and looked back. Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, he seemed embarrassed and uncertain what to do. ‘Tha needn’t bawl thi ‘ead off,’ he threw at me. ‘Anybody’d think I’d murdered thee.’

Bess began to whine. In tears, I threw myself on the floor.

‘Now, tha should stop that at once. It sounds as if tha being murdered. I’ve never seen such. Tha could make thiself ill.’

While father looked on in a disinterested sort of way, Bess and I kept it up.

‘A fine pickle,’ the farmer said, ‘I’ve not only had me dog robbed, I’m goin t’ lose me ‘earin as well.’

After that he stood there bewildered, opening and shutting his mouth.

‘I’ll tell thi what I’ll do: rather than ‘avin thee caterwaulin like that, I’ll give thee t’ dog.’

He bent down to remove the collar. Bess was with me in a flash. I put my arms around her and together we went on crying and shaking.

‘Tis been a bad day,’ the big man muttered as he left the house.

‘A very bad day,’ he said, still shuffling his feet. ‘You two have just wasted my time.’

The moment the door was closed, Bess ceased whining and licked my face and hands. She declared our victory by thumping her tail on the floor.

The man never returned, and Bess and I lived happily ever after. Well, almost. One winter’s day an angry neighbour entered our house:

‘Would yer remove yer dog from my kennel!’ he demanded. ‘Me own dog’s in t’ snow.’

Early in the morning, Bess had wandered down the street, found a warm kennel, tossed out its occupant, and taken possession.