

THE ROAD TO NAB END – Chapter Fifteen

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

When I was nine, Harold Watkins and I borrowed a bike and cycled down to the river to camp there. I rode on the carrier with a borrowed tent, blankets, food and a pot wedged between me and the saddle. The ride was endless and bumpy. I gripped the seat springs in front of me so hard, and for so long, that I couldn't release my fingers when we got there. I also had severe cramp in my bottom and my legs. I had to run up and down the river bank, flapping my arms, trying to restore my circulation.

As we set up the tent, we watched as swallows skimmed the foaming river, feasting on clouds of gnats. Harold and I must have been very hungry, because we ate our two day's rations during the first long twilight. Food gone, our troubles began.

Unlike the warm day that had preceded it, the night became cold with a chilly breeze. The damp rose from the ground and penetrated our limbs. We sat up at every sound. One moment we were certain that someone was being strangled to death at the water's edge; the next moment somebody seemed to be crying for help from the river. Now and again, an owl hooted close by.

Shaking with cold and fear, we agreed that when light came we'd go home. Several hours later, before daybreak, we were wakened by a cow lowing. From the noise it was making it might have been an elephant in agony. We got up to investigate. It was a huge black and white thing, lying on the bank closeby. With her big, sad eyes, she seemed to welcome us. While bellowing across the valley, she heaved and strained. When a calf's head popped out from her rear end, I knew why she wailed so. I'd seen a calf born before, but this birth was no less magical. I stood awestruck.

Though still before daybreak, I thought we should tell the farmer that he'd got a calf. At the house there were dogs barking, but no lights. We had to throw stones at the windows to waken the farmer. After several throws, a wild-looking head appeared.

'What's tha want?' the farmer demanded sharply.

'Tha's got a calf' I shouted, disregarding his ugly look.

'Oh, I 'av, 'av I?'

'Tha 'as.'

'Wheer?'

'Down t' bank. He woke us up.'

'Tha's woke me up. Couldn't ya 've come 'n told me after cockcrow?'

'We thowt tha'd want to know.'

'Yer did, did yer?'

'Ay, besides, we're goin' 'oom.'

'Well that's summat' said the farmer as he slammed down the window.

'Cheeky bugger' I said to Harold. 'He doesn't seem to appreciate us tellin' 'im.'

The only thing we talked about at home was the birth of the calf. Seeing that was worth all the trouble we'd had.