

SILVERTOWN

War again

Jenny Fulcher lives in the East End. She always has done. She is married to Len Page who works on the buses. The two of them live in Altmore avenue and have been married seven years. They have two children now: a girl and a boy.

In the spring of 1939 war is approaching. Preparations begin. Gas lamps are taken down and the window of shops are boarded. Overground shelters go up. Trenches are made across Lyle Park in Silvertown. The Royal Victoria Gardens' rose beds are dug up and replaced with potatoes. Soldiers paint the red pillar boxes with yellow gas-sensitive paint and buses change colour from scarlet to grey. In Altmore Avenue women begin sewing blackout curtains while their men dig Anderson shelters.

One night in October just after the war has begun, Len swings open the door to Altmore Avenue. His breath heavy with beer and in his arms is a set of overalls.

'Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree
Neville Chamberlain said to me
If you want to get yer gas masks free
Join the bleeding ARP'

He slings his overalls down on the table and looks at his wife 'So I did,' he says.

'Blimey,' she says 'Well I never.'

Before the declaration of war, a letter arrives. It is printed on thin paper and breaks unexpected news. The War Office is evacuating Jenny Page and the boy to Billericay, South Essex. They are to stay with a farming couple called the Berrys. The girl is to remain in London.

The news puts Len into a rage.

'Who'll do the washing?' he says 'Who'll look after the girl and see to tea? I'll not do a woman's job. Has the whole world gone topsy-turvy?'

But Len's mother says she'll visit twice a week to clean the place and see to the washing. And so the time comes for Jenny and the boy to leave and they find themselves boarding a train at Liverpool Street station.

The train arrives in Billericay just as the sun is disappearing. Half an hour later Mr Berry finally appears and bundles them into an old-fashioned trap.

'Mrs Berry and me dunno much about children, don't have none ourselves,' he says. 'Can you milk?'

Jenny shakes her head.

'Plant?'

She smiles awkwardly. Mr Berry turns to her and says 'Well, we'll just have to make a countrywoman of yer somehow.'

The next morning Jenny wakes to the sound of a cockerel crowing. She draws the curtain and the air is frosty. Outside there are hedges and fields. It is five thirty in the morning.

There is a knock on the attic door.

'Mrs Page,' says Mrs Berry 'What with the help gone sick we'll not be short of things for you to do. We start the day early here in the country.'

Jenny's first chore is to fetch water from the outside well. When she has hauled three or four buckets and put them in the cooper to heat, there is the hay to fork, the eggs to be collected, the hens to feed, the household laundry to scrub and the cottons to put through the mangle. Everyday is like this and in between times she has the boy to dress and feed and watch over.

After six weeks she has had enough.

'Mr and Mrs Berry,' she says one day at supper 'I reckon we'll be going back home.'

'What?' says Mrs Berry 'When we've only just got used to yer?'

Jenny shrugs 'It's jess that we ain't used to the noises, the mud an' that,' says Jenny 'We're used to London, see?'

'Oh well, Mrs Page,' says Mrs Berry in a curt voice 'If that's how you feel there's no arguing with you. Go back to Lonnon then and get yer two selves bombed to bits.'

Back in London, there are queues everywhere and the shops appear almost empty. Blackout blinds hang at every window. A week later another letter arrives requesting that the Page children report to the Evacuation Board. Jenny packs her children's few belongings in a sacking bag and reminds them to wash their necks. Then she watches them board their train at Liverpool Station and wonders when they will be home.

On 24 August 1940 the sirens begin to sing, but still Jenny would prefer to be in the East End rather than in the countryside.