

SILVERTOWN

A trip to the dogs

Jenny Page lives in Altmore Avenue in East Ham. She is married to Len Page and they have two children. Len Page has started a café called the Cosy Corner on Silvertown Way by the docks. The café is doing very well but Jenny suspects that her husband has a fancy woman. The wife of a friend of Len's called June.

One evening in the spring of 1950, Jenny is sitting at a table in West Ham dogs finishing up a plate of ham and eggs. Opposite Jenny at the same table sits June with her hair pinned back at the sides and curled at the bottom. She is younger than Jenny by ten years or so.

On the other side of the table sits Len and Harry. Poor Harry is tipsy as always and Len is talking about the dogs he owns. The dogs live in a row of crude brick hutches at the kennels in Plaistow. He has two particular favourites: Silvertown Streak and Silvertown Sailor. Len says that Streak has the Edge.

'The Edge,' he says 'You can tell when a pup has the Edge. There's an Edgeness about him you can feel. Now, Streak boy here, he has the Edge.'

On this particular night Len is quietly tipping Silvertown Streak. For the last few weeks Streak has been on terrible form. But tonight something – call it instinct – tells Len Page that Streak is going to run like the clappers. There are five minutes to go before the tenth race and Streak is at long odds of 15 to 1. The handlers lead the runners out into the arena. The number one, a large black dog called 'Daddy's Boy' is followed by Streak.

'Blow me,' says Harry 'If your pup ain't got his blood up.'

'The thing is,' says Len winking 'You can never tell with a dog.'

They sit and wait for the dogs to be placed in their traps then move over to the balcony to get a better look. The hare runs, the traps open and the dogs are flinging themselves across the dirt track. They shear round the first bend, the number one in lead. On the back straight, Streak inches closer, overtaking one dog at the second bend. And as they round the corner, Streak is gunning. He's ahead by a length now. When they reach the finishing mast you can hear the crowd gasp and see the shock in their faces that this 15 to 1 has just wiped out all the competition.

'Well I never,' says Len slapping Harry on the back 'It's my round.'

They make their way to the bar where Len goes up to a group of policemen that he recognises.

'Gents,' Len says 'You on splits tonight? Or off-duty?'

'We're off.'

'Thought I'd buy you fellas a pint to celebrate, like.' Len takes his wad from his pocket and begins counting notes.

'That's big of you.'

'When you've finished come and say hello to the' He hesitates for an instant 'To the wife.'

One of the policeman looks over to Jenny and June sat at the table 'Which one?'

The men laugh and wink.

'Whichever one you like,' says Len 'Whichever you like.'

Harry doesn't hear. He is taking the drinks back to Jenny and June.

June smiles at him 'Know what Harry?' she says 'I fancy some of them

whelks from that stall we passed. You wouldn't be a lovely chap, would you, and go and get some?'

Harry goes and the two women sit awkwardly for a moment.

'Oh Harry,' June says when the whelks arrive 'They don't half look tough. It's not me I'm thinking about so much as Jen, with her teeth and all. You wouldn't take them back, pet, get us some cockles instead?'

Harry disappears again and June plumps her hair. Just then Len bounces over and says 'Come on, June, I'll take you and Harry down the kennels. See Streak before they take him back to Plaistow.' He looks about. 'Oh, Harry ain't here is he? Well just you and me then June.'

'Oh I don't know,' June pulls back her chair 'I look a mess.'

'You look... ' Len stands over her for a moment staring at her face, its familiar contours and lines the face of the woman he should have married. 'You look a picture.'

In miserable silence Jenny watches them go and waits for Harry.

Its very late when Len and June return. The bar has closed and the remaining customers have gone to a back room to play gin rummy.

'June, let's go home,' says Harry grabbing his wife's arm.

Sliding away from his grasp, June lights a cigarette. 'Shut up Harry.'

'C'mon sonny boy,' says Len 'Don't be a creeping Jesus. Let's put some of them winnings on a game of cards.'

'I don't want a game of cards,' says Harry sounding sober now 'I want to go home with my wife.'

Len and June exchange anxious glances.

'Listen sonny boy,' says Len patting Harry on the back 'The thing is, your wife don't want to go home jess yet. Do yer, June?'

'No,' says June 'No, I want to watch gin rummy.'

'So how's about it Harry?'

Harry blinks and sighs 'All right Lenny. All right.'