

SILVERTOWN

War and Headcheese

Jenny Fulcher lives in a two bedroom flat in Ullin Street in the East End. She is one of six and her father works as a ship's carpenter in the Thames Ironworks. Her best friend is Dora Trelling and her favourite things in the world are sweets. The year is 1914.

A hot afternoon in early September finds Jenny Fulcher and Dora Trelling hiding behind a postbox on the East India Dock Road. They watch several hundred thousand men in uniform march in the direction of the ships that will take them to war. All along the route, men and women are leaning from windows laced with bunting, waving and whistling. There's a band playing military tunes and everywhere people are fluttering little Union Jacks on sticks and clapping. A few women are hurrying alongside the marchers, grasping the last few moments before their husband or brother or son finally disappears. One or two are crying, but only one or two, because the papers say it will be the shortest of wars.

'Me dad says signing up is for the birds,' says Dora.

The men continue to march, their faces serious.

'D'you think they'll be getting theirselves killed, Dor?'' asks Jenny.

'Nah, no chance. It's the Germs what's getting theirselves killed.'

'Dor,' says Jenny 'you got some coinage on yer?'

Dora shakes her head. 'Nothing. Why?'

'Jess thinking 'bout sweets, is all.'

They peer out from behind the postbox at the khaki-coloured column in the road.

'When we win the war, do you think we'll have more money, Dor?'

'Sure as eggs is eggs, Jenny pet.'

They make their way south then east to Bow Lane and find themselves in a small crowd outside number 278 – William Utz the butcher's. The crowd is quite unlike the one waving on the soldiers. There is something ugly about it. A young man with a red face has grabbed a brick and is looking as if he means to throw it at Utz's shop window. Some of the crowd appear to be egging him on; others are standing back, shaking their heads.

'What's goin on, Dor?'' says Jenny.

'Don't ask me Jenny girl.'

'I suppose he ain't paid the tallyman.'

'I suppose that's it.'

The two girls pass through the crowd and out the other side. Jenny doesn't mention the incident at home, but the image of the man throwing a brick through Utz's window stays with her. She doesn't like thinking about it and for a few hours she manages to stop, until at tea that day her mother puts a glistening slab of headcheese on the table.

'I got it at Utz's place,' says her mother 'A chap was selling everythin' off cheap right out at the front. He had a little trestle with Utz's meat piled up, bits of glass all over everything but nuffink you couldn't pick out. I dunno where Utz was but when things is going cheap you don't ask questions.'

The family stares at the headcheese sitting on the plate with its little bits of brain, ear, cheek and snout meat. They can't remember how long its been since they

had meat of any kind. Since the start of the war, everything has become so expensive.

‘I ain’t gonna eat no German meat,’ Jenny’s father says ‘Not now.’

Silence falls and the children stare at their laps.

‘Me neither,’ says Jenny’s brother John, sliding away from the table.

‘Nor me,’ says Frances Maud.

Jenny notices her father is staring at her. Her mother gets up from the table and moves the headcheese over to her side.

‘Oh you are silly billies.’

Jenny’s father gets up from the table, goes to his chair by the fire and lights a cigarette. Now there are only two people left: Jenny and her mother.

‘Silly billies,’ repeats her mother, ‘Slicing the slab in two. Here you go Jenny.’

Jenny sits there for a moment, thinking about the boy with the brick at Utz’s shop and the ugly crowd. Every part of her is saying no except the part that counts. And suddenly she can hear the headcheese saying, *I know how badly you want me Jenny*, and then it’s too late and her tongue is lapping around the jellied crust and her teeth are sinking into the meat of the headcheese.

Later, when she and her mother are down at the yard tap washing jam jars, Jenny says ‘How big is the war, Mum?’

‘It’s the size of the world, pet,’ her mother says.

‘Does that mean it’s going on in Aldgate and Whitechapel?’

‘Course it do!’

Jenny rescues a few hairs escaping from her plait. The war is a puzzle to her. If Britain rules the waves, then what is there to fight about? And why is Mr Utz bad now? They’ve been buying tripe off him for years and he wasn’t bad then. Maybe its to do with the name Utz.

‘Mum?’ says Jenny.

‘Oh, you’re a right little Miss Why this evening. What is it now?’

‘We ain’t foreigners are we?’

Her mother smiles and shakes her head ‘No love. We ain’t foreigners. But poor Mr Utz was.’