

## SILVERTOWN

### Teeth

*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. Jenny works at Mark Moses Tailoring as a machinist. Her best friend is Dora Treling and her favourite things in the world are sweets.*

On 18 February 1920, Jenny Fulcher turns seventeen. It is a dreary morning and she is woken early by the cold. Trying not to wake her sisters and brothers, she gets up, pulls on her coat and boots and goes out into the yard to the privy.

Back upstairs the family has risen. Her mother is starting a fire in the grate and her father is smoking.

'Phew, what's that pong?' her father says 'You brought the privy in with you?'

'Happy Birthday Jenny,' says her mother.

They sit down to their usual breakfast of bread and marg, dunked in sweet tea.

'Here go,' says her mother handing Jenny a package and a sixpence. 'Spend it on something nice for your hair.'

'Make the most of it anyway,' says her father 'There'll be no more.'

All morning at work Jenny can't stop thinking about what's inside the package. But if she takes it out in public everyone would want a piece. She takes it into the backyard privy and unwraps the paper. From inside there is a smell of chocolate and rose Turkish Delight.

'Oh Miss Crème,' she says to herself 'You devil,' and for fifteen minutes she sits there eating the sweets on the privy.

That night when she gets back to Ullin Street the atmosphere is tense. Her mother looks guilty.

'Jenny pet,' she says 'Drink your cuppa then we'll be off.'

'Off where?'

'Off where you'll see.'

It might be reasonable to think that Jenny would be going on some surprise outing to celebrate her birthday. But this is the East End in 1920 and there are no surprise outings, leastwise no celebratory ones. Jenny puts on her coat and follows her daughter out of the door of number four Ullin Street.

They walk along St Leonard's Road then turn west towards Chrisp Street where a few men still stand behind their market stalls. Then they take the alleys towards Limehouse and finally to a dingy shop front. They stop before the door and Jenny looks up at her mother.

'Shh,' she says 'Enough questions.'

Inside is an oily wooden floor and a bell above the door. There is a metallic smell.

'Mum?' says Jenny.

'Shh, you'll see.'

Hearing the bell, a stout man in his fifties comes out of the back room. 'Ah,' he says 'The young lady.'

'Well,' says Jenny's mother awkwardly 'Well I'll be off then.'

The stout man smiles then he goes to a hook on the back of the door and takes down a butcher's apron.

It takes three hours to pull out all the teeth in Jenny Fulcher's mouth. Three quarters of a century she will still recall the pain. The butcher uses a monkey wrench,

more commonly used for unscrewing rivets and rusty bolts. There is no anaesthetic. Jenny is strapped into a chair with docker's belts . Every so often an old woman appears and offers her a jar of cheap hooch, and tells Jenny to drink deep and stop making a fuss.

When she gets back home her face is as puffed as a cottage loaf.

'Cup of tea pet?' her mother says 'No? Well then.'

Her mother moves to wipe the tears falling down her daughter's face. She leans over and kisses the girl on the forehead. 'I'll get Maudie to go round Dora's and ask her to come over tomorrow and cheer you up.'

The next morning the first thing Jenny sees is Dora sitting at the end of her bed knitting. She is singing

Oh we lark down Poplar way  
It's a cheery place to be  
For they ain't too posh down Poplar way  
For the likes of you and me.

Dora winks at her 'Our Jenny love. I thought you was never waking up.'

Jenny tries to speak 'Are, En?'

Dora puts down her knitting and kisses her friend on the forehead.

'You must have known it was coming Jenny, I mean what with your sister Frances having it done.'

But Jenny didn't know it was coming. She always assumed her sister had been born with teeth you took out.

'Frances is probably grateful now she's getting married and all,' Dora says. Jenny tries to frown. She doesn't understand what Frances' teeth have to do with marriage. And why is Dora such an expert on the subject?

Jenny waits two weeks for the holes in her mouth to seal and is then fitted with some porcelain teeth which make her feel she is chewing on tea cups. For weeks she cannot bear to approach a mirror and when she does the face she sees is not her own.

No explanation is given to Jenny for what has happened. But about a month later the topic comes up in a conversation with Dora. They are talking about the wedding of Jenny's sister Frances.

Dora says 'It ain't cheap getting married, is it? What with the bunch of flowers and what you got ter pay the vicar.'

'Oh,' says Jenny 'don't you worry, Frances' fancy man's got a bit of money.'

'That's the risk you take,' says Dora shrugging her shoulders.

'What?'

'Well,' says Dora 'havin' yer teeth pulled then marrying a chap what's got money anyway.'

Jenny is confused 'Money for what?' she asks.

'What I mean is, it's a bit rich when you 'ave yer teeth pulled to save yer future hubbie the cost of the dentist and then you wind up with an old man who got coinage to pay for 'em anyway.'

Jenny isn't sure she understands. Does Dora think her parents had their daughter's teeth removed to save her future husband money?

Dora looks at her with astonishment 'Well of course they did.' she says, 'lots of parents do that.'