

SILVERTOWN

Sewing

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.

In 1917 Jenny leaves Bright Street school for good. She is fourteen. Through a cousin of Dora's she hears there are vacancies for seamstresses at Moses' outfitters in Stepney, just east of the Mile End Waste. A few days later Jenny and Dora find themselves in front of an old brick house with a peeling sign reading M.Moses, Quality Tailoring. Pushing through the entrance, they clamber up broken stairs and knock tentatively at a brown door marked Office. The supervisor is a grey-faced man in his fifties with a voice like an old hinge. He says that Mr Moses is thinking of taking on a couple of youngsters. Moses prefers boys but there is little point in taking on anyone who might be drafted in a year or two's time should the war go on. So girls it is, says the supervisor, if girls it has to be. They can come back and speak to Mr Moses himself on Friday afternoon.

'Ere Dor' says Jenny on the walk back to Poplar 'When we start working will we be rich?' They make their way down to Commercial Road, past the alleys of Stepney.

'Sure as eggs is eggs,' says Dor.

'How rich?'

'So rich that we'll eat headcheese and corny beef and sweets.'

They are walking along the towpath at Limehouse Cut, beside the gypsy boats with their brilliantly painted cabins.

'When I'm rich I'm gonna walk through the door of Mrs Folkman's and say, So Mrs F, what have you got in today that is particularly good? And Mrs F will say, Well Miss Fulcher, it's funny you ask because only this morning I made up a batch of violet crèmes and there's some splendid fudge and all. And I'll say, Very good Mrs F, top hole, make me up a half pound of both. I shall be paying, as usual, in cash.'

The following Friday afternoon, Jenny and Dora return to the Mile End Workshops. A large lady in a brown wig shows them into the main workroom. She sets them in front of a sewing machine and takes ten minutes explaining how to use it. Then she hands each of the girls two small scraps of fabric and says she'll be back in ten minutes to inspect their work. The girls sit speechless.

'Blow me if I know where to start,' says Dora poking at the needle. 'I ain't been this scared of nothing since me mum cut a loaf and there was a rat baked inside. But at least the rat was dead.' Dora brings her foot hard down on the treadle and the needle begins jerking madly 'Jenny,' she says 'We ain't never gonna be rich unless we get them seams done.'

'I think you 'ave to do it slower, Dor,' says Jenny and with the greatest caution she eases her foot on to the treadle and the needle floats upwards. 'Like this.'

Five minutes later Jenny has put an elegant seam across the fabric.

'How d'you get it straight then?' asks Dora struggling with a net of knotted threads. 'Finish this off before Mrs Wig comes back, will yer?'

'Right-o Dor.'

'And Jenny you won't tell, will yer?'

Jenny Fulcher shakes her head and smiles. 'Not in a million years Dor.'

The two girls leave with the promise of a job picking pins and clearing away threads for six shillings a week and all the sugared tea they can drink. Marching across the Mile End Waste they feel as though they have grown a foot in an afternoon. All along the route men are busy putting London back together, replacing bombed brickwork, boarding up shattered windows and clearing up empty plots for rebuild.

'Let's check on the mooches and the gyppos,' says Dora.

'Me mum don't like us having nothing to do with them, Dor. Me mum says they're common as muck.'

'We can do what we like,' says Dora fingering her yellow hair.

'Can we?'

'Course. We're in the money now, ain't we?'