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Opening extract from

The Bomber Balloon

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Chapter 1

DORA and the dog

Peldon, Essex, 24th Sept 1916

Millie Watson screamed. She wasn't afraid of the dark. But when she ran into the man, as solid as a brown-backed bear, she screamed.

She had been running through the dark and empty streets. The gas street lamps were never turned on at night now. 'The balloon bombers will see the lamps and drop their bombs on our house,' her mum had explained as she heated the clothes iron over the fire.

Dad had been sitting at the far side of the fireplace, smoking a pipe and reading the newspaper. 'How many times do I have to tell you, Mrs Watson, they are not balloon bombers – they are Zeppelins.'

'Yes, Mr Watson,' her mother replied, 'but we aren't all clever like you. Some of us don't understand words like zippy-things. All our Millie needs to know is they are big balloons that drop nasty bombs.'

Mr Watson's moustache bristled as he sighed. 'Zeppelins are large frames of wood or metal as long as our street. They are covered with canvas and filled with gas. They are so light they can carry twenty men and fifty bombs.'

Mrs Watson turned from ironing the shirt to Millie. 'He just read that in the paper. He reads that paper and believes every word. Then he repeats it like a parrot

to his mates in the pub. They think he's the brainiest bloke in Britain. But really he's just a parrot.'

Mr Watson sniffed and ignored her.

'Squawk, squawk. Who's a pretty boy then?' Mrs Watson said.

Her husband poked at the dusty coal on the fire. 'Time I went to the pub,' he said.



Mrs Watson turned to Millie again. 'We're short of food – not enough bread and butter and milk and eggs to go around. But those men still manage to find beer.'

'I am going to a meeting,' Mr Watson said. 'The Royal Defence group want to talk about DORA.'

'Dora Potts in our class?' Millie asked.

'No, child,' Mrs Watson said. 'Defence Of the Realm Act... D-O-R-A. All the things we have to do, now we are at war. DORA is just rules you have to stick to or the policeman will send you to prison.'

Mr Watson shrugged himself into his coat and placed his cap on his head. 'The people who break the rules will be fined, Mrs Watson – not sent to prison. And the police are too busy to do it, so the men of the town will form a Royal Defence Army.



We will patrol the streets and make sure DORA is obeyed.'

'You'll enjoy that,' Mrs Watson muttered.

'A man must do his duty.'

Mrs Watson folded her arms. 'That's telling us, Millie. But if you ask me, it's just an excuse to go to the pub.'

Mr Watson picked up his newspaper, folded it neatly and slid it into his pocket. 'I will be back later...'

'If a zippy-thing doesn't drop a bomb on your head,' his wife said.

As Mr Watson left she folded her ironing, took up her knitting and clicked away quietly while Millie picked up a book. It was called *The Flower Fairies* and Miss Jepson, her teacher, had let Millie take it home to practise her reading.

'Nice book?' her mum asked.

'Fairies,' Millie said with a sigh. 'The boys get to read proper books about war and fighting. I have to read about fairies.'

Mrs Watson smiled. 'Why not run along to the corner shop on Mersea Road? The woman next door says they are getting some eggs delivered tonight. Take sixpence out of the tea caddy and run and see if you can get us some.'

Millie threw down the book, collected

the silvery coin and raced out of the house into the dark street.



The old man who lit the gas lamps with a long pole never came around the streets now. Not since the war against Germany started. Millie often wondered what had happened to the old man.

Her thin boots were slapping on the pavements, her thinner hair streaming

behind her, and her mouth open and panting. Millie loved running.

The houses had heavy curtains at the windows but there was still a glow in the streets. Enough for her to race along the roads without falling.

She dodged around the lampposts and the pillar-boxes and into Church Road. She knew what was coming and giggled as she gasped and ran. There, on the doorstep of number 17, Mac the dog was waiting. A sandy-coloured dog with a tattered ear. A mongrel with a bad temper and a yap like a broken hinge.

Mac heard Millie's slapping soles before she turned the corner and a growl grew in his throat. When he saw the running girl his little black teddy-bear eyes glowed like coals. He leapt forward, yapping madly and snapping at her flying heels.

'Can't catch me!' she screamed. That wasn't true. But Mac wanted to warn her off, not bite her. She knew that when she reached the end of his road he would stop.

Millie turned the corner and backed down Mersea Road, panting and giggling. That was how she walked into the man who was solid as a bear.

And that was when Millie screamed.