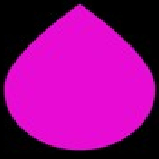

JOHN OXENHAM

1914

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The early morning of July 25th, 1914, was not at all such as the date might reasonably have led one to expect. It was gray and overcast, with heavy dew lying white on the grass and a quite unseasonable rawness in the air.

The clock on the mantelpiece of the morning-room in The Red House, Willstead, was striking six, in the sonorous Westminster chimes, which were so startlingly inconsistent with its size, as Mr John Dare drew the bolts of the French window and stepped out on to his back lawn.

He had shot the bolts heavily and thoughtfully the night before, long after all the rest had gone up to bed, though he noticed, when he went up himself, that Noel's light still gleamed under his door. His peremptory tap and 'Get to bed, boy!' had produced an instant eclipse, and he determined to speak to him about it in the morning.

He had never believed in reading in bed himself. Bed was a place in which to sleep and recuperate. If it had been a case of midnight oil and the absorption of study now—all well and good. But Noel's attitude towards life in general and towards study in particular permitted no such illusion.

And it was still heavily and thoughtfully that Mr Dare drew back the bolts and stepped out into the gray morning. Not that he knew definitely that this twenty-fifth of July was a day big with the fate of empires and nations, and of the world at large,—simply that he had not slept well; and bed, when you cannot sleep, is the least restful place in the world.

As a rule he slept very soundly and woke refreshed, but for many nights now his burdened brain had neglected its chances, and had chased, and been chased by, shadowy phantoms,—possibilities, doubts, even fears,—which sober daylight scoffed at, but which, nevertheless, seemed to lurk in his pillow and swarm out for his undoing the moment he laid his tired head upon it.

Out here in the fresh of the morning,—which ought by rights to have been full of sunshine and beauty, the cream of a summer day,—he could, as a rule, shake off the shadows and get a fresh grip on realities and himself.

But the very weather was depressing. The year seemed already on the wane. There were fallen leaves on the lawn. The summer flowers were despondent. There was a touch of red in the Virginia creeper which covered the house. The roses wore a downcast look. The hollyhocks and sweet-peas showed signs of decrepitude. It seemed already Autumn, and the chill damp air made one think of coming Winter.

And the unseasonal atmospheric conditions were remarkably akin to his personal feelings.

For days he had had a sense of impending trouble in business matters, all the more irritating because so ill-defined and impalpable. Troubles that one could tackle in the open one faced as a matter of course, and got the better of as a matter of business. But this ‘something coming and no knowing what’ was very upsetting, and his brows knitted perplexedly as he paced to and fro, from the arch that led to the kitchen-garden to the arch that led to the front path, up which in due course Smith’s boy would

come whistling with the world’s news and possibly something that might cast a light on his shadows.

Mr Dare’s business was that of an import and export merchant, chiefly with the Continent, and his offices were in St Mary Axe. He had old connections all over Europe and was affiliated with the Paris firm of Leroux and Cie, Charles Leroux having married his sister.

As a rule his affairs ran full and smooth, with no more than the to-be-expected little surface ruffles. But for some weeks past he had been acutely conscious of a disturbance in the commercial barometer, and so far he had failed to make out what it portended.

Politically, both at home and abroad, matters seemed much as usual, always full of menacing possibilities, to which, however, since nothing came of them, one had grown somewhat calloused.

The Irish brew indeed looked as if it might possibly boil over. That gun-running business was not at all to his mind. But he was inclined to think there was a good deal of bluff about it all. And the suffragettes were ramping about and making fools of themselves in their customary senseless fashion, and doing all the damage they possibly could to their own cause and to the nation at large.

The only trouble of late on the Continent had been the murder of the Archduke Ferdinand and his wife about a month before. And that seemed to be working itself off in acrimonious snappings and yappings by the Austrian and Servian papers. Austria would in due course undoubtedly claim such guarantees of future good behaviour on the part of her troublesome little neighbour as the circumstances,

when fully investigated, should call for. The tone of the note she had sent, calling on Servia no longer to permit the brewing of trouble within her borders, was somewhat brusque no doubt but not unnaturally so. And Servia, weary with her late struggles, would, of course, comply and there the matter would end.

It was unthinkable that the general peace should suffer from such a cause when it had survived the great flare-up in the Balkans the year before. Austria would not dare to go too far since she must first consult Germany, and the Kaiser, it was well known, desired nothing better than to maintain the peace which he had kept so resolutely for five-and-twenty years. If it had been that hot-head, the Crown Prince, now—— But fortunately for the world the reins were in cooler hands.

Then again the Money Market here showed no more disturbance than was to be expected under such unsettled conditions, and the Bank-rate remained at three per cent. The Berlin and Vienna Bourses were somewhat unsettled. But there were always adventurous spirits abroad ready to take advantage of any little disturbance and reap nefarious harvests.

Anyway he could see no adequate connection between any of these things and the sudden stoppage of his deliveries of beet-sugar from Germany and Austria, and the unusual lapsus in correspondence and remittances from both those countries,—which matters were causing him endless worry and anxiety.

His brother-in-law, Leroux, in Paris, had hinted at no gathering clouds, as he certainly would have done had any

been perceptible. And the sensitive pulse of international affairs on the Bourse there would have perceived them instantly if they had existed. The very fact that M. Poincaré, the President, was away in Russia was proof positive that the sky was clear.

The only actual hint of anything at all out of the common was in that last letter from his eldest girl, Lois, who had been studying at the Conservatorium in Leipsic for the last two years.

She had written, about a week before,—“What is brewing? There is a spirit of suppressed excitement abroad here, but I cannot learn what it means. They tell me it is the usual preparation for the Autumn manœuvres. It may be so, but all the time I have been here I have never seen anything quite like it. If they were preparing for war I could understand it, but that is of course out of the question, since the Kaiser’s heart is set on peace, as everyone knows.”

There was not much in that in itself, though Lois was an unusually level-headed girl and not likely to lay stress on imaginary things. But that, and the evasiveness, when it was not silence, of his German correspondents, and the non-arrival of his contracted-for supplies of beet-sugar, had set his mind running on possibilities from which it recoiled but could not shake itself entirely free.

Presently, as he paced the well-defined track he had by this time made across the dewy lawn, he heard the rattle of the kitchen grate as heavy-handed Sarah lit the fire, and the gush of homely smoke from the chimney had in it a suggestion of breakfast that put some of his shadows to flight. Sarah and breakfast were substantial every-day facts

before which the blue devils born of broken sleep temporarily withdrew.

Then from behind Honor’s wide-open window and drawn curtains he heard her cheerful humming as she dressed. And then her curtains were switched aside with a strenuous rattle, and at sight of him she stuck out her head with a saucy,

“Hello, Mr Father! Got the hump? What a beast of a day! I say,—you *are* wearing a hole in that carpet. Doesn’t look much of a day for a tennis tournament, does it? Rotten! I just wish I had the making of this country’s weather; anyone who wished might make her——”

Smith’s boy’s exuberant whistle sounded in the front garden, and Honor chimed in, “Good-bye, Piccadilly!”—as her father hastened to the gate to get his paper.

Smith’s boy was just preparing to fold and hurl it at the porch—a thing he had been strictly forbidden to do, since on wet and windy days it resulted in an unreadable rag retrieved from various corners of the garden instead of a reputable news-sheet. At the unexpected appearance of Mr Dare in the archway, his merry pipe broke off short at the farewell to Leicester Square, and Honor’s clear voice round the corner carried them triumphantly to the conclusion that it was “a long long way to Tipperary,” without obbligato accompaniment. The boy grinned, and producing a less-folded paper from his sheaf, retired in good order through the further gate, and piped himself bravely up the Oakdene path next door, while Mr Dare shook the paper inside out and stood searching for anything that might in any way bear upon his puzzle.

His anxious eye leaped at once to the summary of foreign news, and his lips tightened.

“The Austrian Minister has been instructed to leave Belgrade unless the Servian Government complies with the Austrian demand by 6 p.m. this evening.”

An ultimatum!... Bad!... Dangerous things, ultimatums!

“It is stated that Russia has decided to intervene on behalf of Servia.”

“H’m! If Russia,—then France! If France,—then Germany and Italy!... And how shall we stand? It is incredible,” and he turned hastily for hope of relief to the columns of the paper, and read in a leader headed “*Europe and the Crisis*,”—“All who have the general peace at heart must hope that Austria has not spoken her last word in the note to Servia, to which she requires a reply to-night. If she has we stand upon the edge of war, and of a war fraught with dangers that are incalculable to all the Great Powers.”

Then the front door opened and his wife came out into the porch.

“Breakfast’s ready, father,” she said briskly. “Any news?”

She was a very comely woman of fifty or so, without a gray hair yet and of an unusually pleasing and cheerful countenance. The girls got their good looks from her, the boys took more after their father.

“Any light on matters?” asked Mrs Dare hopefully again, as he came slowly along the path towards her. And then, at sight of his face, “Whatever is it, John?”

He had made it a rule to leave ordinary business worries behind him in town where they properly belonged. But matters of moment he frequently discussed with his wife

and had found her aloof point of view and clear common-sense of great assistance at times. His late disturbance of mind had been very patent to her, but, beyond the simple facts, he had been able to satisfy her no more than himself.

“Very grave news, I’m afraid,” he said soberly. “Austria and Servia look like coming to blows.”

“Oh?” said Mrs Dare, in a tone which implied no more than interested surprise. “I should have thought Servia had had enough fighting to last her for some time to come.”

“I’ve no doubt she has. It’s Austria driving at her. Russia will probably step in, and so Germany, Italy, France, and maybe ourselves——”

“John!”—very much on the alert now.—“It is not possible.”

“I’m afraid it’s even probable, my dear. And if it comes it will mean disaster to a great many people.”

“What about Lois? Will she be safe out there?”

“We must consider that. I’ve hardly got round to her yet. Let us make sure of one more comfortable breakfast anyway,” he said, with an attempt at lightness which he was far from feeling, and as they went together to the breakfast-room, Honor came dancing down the stairs.

“Hello, Dad! Did they give extra prizes for early rising at your school?” she asked merrily, and ran on without waiting for an answer,—“And did you choke that boy who was whistling ‘Tipperary’? I had to finish without accompaniment and he was doing it fine. He has a musical soul. It was Jimmy Snaggs. He’s in my class at Sunday School. You should hear him sing.”

“You tell him again from me that if he can’t deliver papers properly he’d better find some other walk in life,” said Mr Dare, as he chipped an egg and proceeded with his breakfast.

“It looks all right,” said Honor, picking up the paper. “Let’s see the cricket. Old No’s aching to hear. Hm—hm—hm—Kent beat Middlesex at Maidstone,—Blythe and Woolley’s fine bowling,—Surrey leads for championship. That’s all right. Hello, what’s all this?—‘Servia challenged. King Peter’s appeal to the Tsar. Grave decisions impending. The risk to Europe.’ I—*say*! Is there going to be another war? How ripping!”

“Honor!” said her mother reprovingly.

“Well, I don’t mean that, of course. But a war does make lively papers, doesn’t it? I’m sick of Ireland and suffragettes.”

“If this war comes you’ll be sicker of it than of anything you ever experienced, before it’s over, my dear,” said Mr Dare gravely.

“Why?—Austria and Servia?”

“And Russia and Germany and France and Italy and possibly England.”

“My Goodness! You don’t mean it, Dad?” and she eyed him keenly. “I believe you’re just—er—pulling my leg, as old No would say?” and she plunged again into the paper.

“Bitter fact, I fear, my dear.”

“How about Lois? Will she be in the thick of it?” she asked, raising her head for a moment to stare meditatively at him, with the larger part of her mind still busy with the news.

“We were just thinking of her. I’m inclined to wire her to come home at once.”

Then Noel strolled in with a nonchalant, “Morning everybody!... Say, Nor! What about the cricket? You promised——”

“Cricket’s off, my son,” said Honor, reading on. “It’s war and a case of fighting for our lives maybe.”

“Oh, come off!”—then, noticing the serious faces of the elders,—“Not really? Who with?”

“Everybody,” said Honor. “—Armageddon!”

He went round to her and pored eagerly over the paper with his head alongside hers. They were twins and closely knit by many little similarities of thought and taste and feeling.

“Well!... I’ll—be—bowled!” as he gradually assimilated the news. “Do you really think it’ll come to a general scrap?”—to his father.

“Those who have better means of judging than I have evidently fear it, my boy. I shall learn more in the City no doubt,” and he hurried on with his breakfast.

The front-door bell shrilled sharply.

“Post!” said Honor. “Must be something big,” and dashed away to get it. She never could wait for the maid’s leisurely progress when letters were in question, and she and the postman were on the best of terms. He always grinned when she came whirling to the door.

“Why—Colonel!” they heard her surprised greeting. “And Ray! You *are* early birds. I thought you were the post. What worms are you after now? Is it the War?”—as she ushered them into the drawing-room.

“Bull’s-eye first shot,” said a stentorian voice. “Has your father gone yet, Honor?”

“Just finishing his breakfast, Colonel. I’ll tell him,” and as she turned to go, her father came in.

“How are you, Colonel?” said Mr Dare. “Good morning, Ray! What are our prospects of keeping out of it, do you think?”

“None,” said the Colonel gravely. “It’s ‘The Day’ they’ve been getting ready for all these years, and that we’ve been expecting—some of us, and unable to get ready for because you others thought differently. But we want a word or two with Mrs Dare too. Will you beg her to favour us, Honor, my dear?” and Honor sped to summon her mother to the conference.

“We must apologise for calling at such an hour, Mrs Dare,” said the Colonel, as they shook hands, “But the matter admits of no delay. Ray here wants your permission to go out and bring Lois home. We think she is in danger out there.”

“You know how things are between us, dear Mrs Dare,” broke in Ray impulsively. “We have never really said anything definite, but we understand one another. And if it’s going to be a general scrap all round, as Uncle Tony is certain it is, then the sooner she is clear of it the better. I’ve never been easy in my mind about her since that little beast von Helse brought her over last year.”

At which a reminiscent smile flickered briefly in the corners of Mrs Dare’s lips and made Ray think acutely of Lois, who had just that same way of savouring life’s humours.

“I was thinking of wiring for her to come home, as soon as I got to town,” said Mr Dare.

“If my views are correct,” said the Colonel weightily, “and I fear you’ll find them so, travelling, over there, will be no easy matter. The moment mobilisation is ordered—and the possibility is that it’s going on now for all they are worth,—everything will be under martial law,—all the railways in the hands of the military, all traffic disorganised,—possibly the frontiers closed. Everything chock-a-block, in fact. It may be no easy job to get her safely out even now. But if anyone can do it, in the circumstances, I’ll back Ray. He’s glib at German and knows his way about, and where Lois is concerned——”

“It is very good of you, Ray,”—began Mrs Dare, warmly.

“Not a bit. It’s good of you to trust her to me. I can start in an hour, and I’ll bring her back safe or know the reason why. Thank you so much!” and he gripped her hand and then suddenly bent forward and kissed her on the cheek. “I’m nearly packed,”—at which Mrs Dare’s smile flickered again.—“I’ll cut away and finish. I must catch the ten o’clock from Victoria, and bar accidents I’ll be in Leipsic to-morrow morning. You might perhaps give me just a little note for her, saying you approve my coming,” and he hurried away to finish his preparations.

Honor and Noel heard him going and sped out after him, all agog to know what it was all about.

“Here! What’s up among all you elderly people?” cried Noel.

“No time to talk, old man. They’ll tell you all about it,” Ray called over his shoulder and disappeared through the

front gate.

“Well!—I’m blowed! Old Ray’s got a move on him. What’s he up to, I wonder.”

“I’ll tell you, No. He’s going after Lois——”

“After Lois? Why—what’s wrong with Lo?”

“Don’t you see? If there’s going to be war over there she might get stuck and not be able to get home for years——”

“Oh—years! It’ll all be over in a month. Wars now-a-days don’t run into time. It’s too expensive, my child.”

“Well, anyway, old Lo will be a good deal better safe at home than in the thick of it. And I guess that’s what Ray and the Colonel think.”

“I’d no idea they’d got that far. Of course I knew he was sweet on her. You could see that when that von Helse chap was here, and old Ray used to look as if he’d like to chew him up.”

“I knew all about it.”

“Of course. Girls always talk about these things.”

“She never said a word. But I knew all the same.”

“Kind of instinct, I suppose.”

Here the elders came out of the drawing-room, preceded, as the door opened, by the Colonel’s emphatic pronouncement,

“—Inevitable, my dear sir. We cannot possibly escape being drawn in. Their plans are certain to be based on getting in through Belgium and Luxembourg. We’ve been prepared for that for many years past. And if they touch Belgium the fat’s in the fire, for we’re bound to stop it—if we can. If some of us had had our way we’d be in a better position to do it than we are. Anyhow we’ll have to do our

best. We'd have done better if you others had had less faith in German bunkum. Noel, my boy," as Noel saluted, "We shall probably want you before we're through."

"You think it'll be a tough business, sir?"

"Tough? It'll be hell, my boy, before the slate's all clean again. And that won't be till the Kaiser and all his gang are wiped off it for ever."

"I thought it would be all over in a month or two."

"A year or two may be more like it. Germany is one big fighting-machine, and till it's smashed there'll be no peace in the world."

"Think they'll get over here, sir?" chirped Honor expectantly.

"They'll try, if we leave them a chance. Thank God,—and Winston Churchill—we're ready for them there. That man's looked ahead and he's probably saved England."

"Good old Winston!"

"If you're off, Dare, I'll walk along with you. I must call at the Bank. It won't do for Ray to run out of funds over there. Good-bye, Mrs Dare! Bring you good news in a day or two. Ta-ta, Honor!"

"You'll let me stand my share——" began Mr Dare, as they walked along together.

"Tut, man! You'll need all your spare cash before we're through and I've plenty lying idle."

"You really think it may be a long business?"

"I don't see how it can be anything else. Have you had no warnings of its coming from any of your correspondents?"

“We told you of Lois’s letter. We’ve had nothing more than that—except delay in goods coming through—and in remittances.”

“Exactly! Railways too busy carrying men and horses; and business men preferring to keep their money in their own hands. I tell you they’ve been working up to this for years, only waiting for the psychological moment.”

“And why is this the psychological moment? The Servian affair hardly seems worth all the pother——”

“Do you remember a man named Humbert attacking the French War Minister in the Senate, about a fortnight ago, on the subject of their army,—no boots, no ammunition, no guns worth firing, no forts, and so on?”

“I remember something about it. I remember it struck me as a rather foolish display of joints in the armour——”

“And Petersburg was all upside down, the other day, with out-of-work riots. Crowds, one hundred thousand strong, slaughtering the police, even while Poincaré was visiting the Tsar. You remember that?”

“Yes.”

“And at home here, matters in Ireland looked like coming to a head. In fact it looked like civil war.”

“I never believed it would come to anything of the kind, as you know.”

“But to that exceedingly clever busy-body, the Kaiser,—at least, he thinks he’s exceedingly clever. It’s possible to be too clever.—Well, here were his three principal enemies all tied up in knots. What better chance would he ever get?”

“H’m! All the same he seems doing his best to smooth things over.”

“Bunkum, my boy!—all bunkum! He may try to save his face to the world at large, but I bet you they’re quietly mobilising over there as fast as they know how to, and that’s faster than we dream of. And the moment they’re ready they’ll burst out like a flood and sweep everything before them—unless we can dam it, damn ’em! Perhaps you’ll look in this evening and tell me how the City feels about it,” and at the door of the Bank they parted, and Mr Dare went on to his train in anything but a comfortable frame of mind.

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They had been neighbours now for close on ten years and close friends for nine and a half of them.

Noel and Honor were mischievous young things of eight when the Dares took The Red House, and in their adventurous prowlings they very soon made the acquaintance of Miss Victoria Luard, aged nine and also of an adventurous disposition, who lived at Oakdene, the big white house next door with black oak beams all over its forehead,—“like Brahmin marks only the other way,”—as Honor said, which gave it a surprised, wide-awake, lifted-eyebrows look.

From the youngsters the acquaintance spread to the elder members of the two families, and grew speedily into very warm friendship, in spite of the fact that the Dares were all sturdy Liberals, and the Luards, as a family, staunch Conservatives.

Colonel Luard, V.C., C.B.—Sir Anthony indeed, but he always insisted on the Colonel, since, as he said, “That was my own doing, sir, but the other—da-ash it!—I’d nothing to do with that. It was in the family and my turn came.”

He was small made, and of late inclined to stoutness which he strove manfully to subdue, and he wore a close little muzzle of a moustache, gray, almost white now, and slight side-whiskers in the style of the late highly-esteemed Prince Consort. But though his moustache and whiskers and hair and eyebrows all showed unmistakable signs of his seventy-eight years, his little figure—except in front—was as

straight as ever. He was as full of fire and go as a shrapnel shell, and his voice, on occasion, was as much out of proportion to his size as was that of the clock with the deep Westminster chimes on the breakfast-room mantelpiece at The Red House.

He looked a bare sixty-five, but as a youngster he had been through the Crimean campaign and the Indian Mutiny, and in the latter gained the coveted cross “For Valour” by exploding a charge at a rebel fort-gate which had already cost a score of lives and still blocked Britain’s righteous vengeance.

He had been on the Abyssinian Expedition and in the Zulu War, and had returned from the latter so punctured with assegai wounds that he vowed he looked like nothing but a da-asht pin-cushion. Then he came into the title, and a very comfortable income, through the death of an uncle, who had made money in the banking business and received his baronetcy as reward for party-services; and after one more campaign—up Nile with Wolseley after Gordon—the Colonel retired on his honors and left the field to younger men.

He found his brother, Geoff, just married and vicar of Iver Magnus, went to stop with him for a time, and stopped on—a very acceptable addition to the vicar’s household. When the children came, who so acceptable, and in every way so adequate, a godfather as the Colonel? And, with the very comfortable expectations incorporated in him, how resist his vehement choice of names,—extraordinary as they seemed to the hopeful father and mother?

And so he had the eldest girl christened Alma, after his first engagement; and the boy who came next he named Raglan, after his first esteemed commander; and the next girl he was actually going to call Balaclava; but there Mrs. Vicar struck, and nearly wept herself into a fever, until they compounded on Victoria, after Her Majesty.

When Vic was five, and Ray ten, and Alma twelve, their father and mother both died in an heroic attempt at combating an epidemic of typhoid, and Uncle Tony shook off the dust and smells of Iver Magnus, bought Oakdene at Willstead, and set up his establishment there, with little Miss Mitten, the sister of his special chum Major Mitten—who had been pin-cushioned by the Zulus at the same time as himself only more so—as vice-reine.

Miss Mitten was sixty-seven if she was a day, but never admitted it even at census-time. She was an eminently early-Victorian little lady, had taught in a very select ladies' school, and had written several perfectly harmless little books, which at the time had obtained some slight vogue but had long since been forgotten by every one except the 'eminent authoress' herself, as some small newspaper had once unforgettably dubbed her.

She was as small and neat as the Colonel himself, and in spite of the ample living at Oakdene her slim little figure never showed any signs of even comfortable rotundity. She was in fact sparely made, and the later fat years had never succeeded in making good the deficiencies of the many preceding lean ones. She wore the neatest of little gray curls at the side of her head, and, year in year out, they never varied by so much as one single hair.

She was very gentle, a much better housekeeper than might have been expected, and was partial to the black silk dresses and black silk open-work mittens of the days of long ago. The youngsters called her Auntie Mitt., and the Colonel they called Uncle Tony. She alone of all their world invariably addressed the Colonel as ‘Sir Anthony,’ and in her case only he raised no objection, since he saw that she thereby obtained some peculiar little inward satisfaction.

Alma, the eldest girl, was, in this year of grace 1914, twenty-six, though you would never have thought it to look at her. She was a tall handsome girl, dark, as were all the Luards, and three years before this, had suddenly shaken off the frivolities of life and gone in for nursing, with an ardour and steady persistence which had surprised her family and greatly pleased the Colonel, whose still-keen, dark eyes twinkled understandingly and approvingly.

Raglan—Ray to all his friends—was twenty-four, two inches taller than Alma, broad of shoulder and deep of chest,—he had pulled stroke in his College eight, and his clean-shaven face, with its firm mouth and jaw and level brows, was good to look upon. He was studying the honourable profession of the law and intended to reach the Woolsack or know the reason why. Partly as a sop to the martial spirit of Uncle Tony, and also because he had deemed it a duty—though he speedily found it a pleasure also—he had joined the Territorials and was at this time a first lieutenant in the London Scottish, and a very fine figure he made in the kilt and sporran.

Victoria, who so narrowly escaped being Balaclava, was nineteen and the political heretic of the family. She was an

ardent Home-Ruler, a Suffragist, a Land-Reformer, played an almost faultless game at tennis, could give the Colonel 30 at billiards and beat him 100 up with ten to spare; and held a ten handicap on the links. She was in fact very advanced, very full of energy and good spirits, and frankly set on getting out of life every enjoyable thrill it could be made to yield.

Their close intimacy with the Dares had been of no little benefit to all three of them. Accustomed from their earliest years to the atmosphere of an ample income, they had never experienced any necessity for self-denial, self-restraint, or any of the little dove-coloured virtues which add at times an unexpected charm to less luxurious lives.

They found that charm among the Dares and profited by it. To their surprise, as they grew old enough to understand it, they found their own easy lives narrower in many respects than their neighbours', although obviously Uncle Tony's open purse was as much wider and deeper than Mr Dare's as Oakdene, with its well-tended lawns and beds and shrubberies and orchard and kitchen-gardens, was larger than The Red House and its trifling acre. And yet, as children, they had always had better times on the other side of the hedge, when they had made a hole large enough to crawl through; and Christmas revels and Halloweens in The Red House were things to look back upon even yet.

Perhaps it was Mrs Dare that made all the difference. Auntie Mitt was a little dear and all that, and Uncle Tony was an old dear and as good as gold. But there was something about Mrs Dare which gave a different feeling to The Red House and everything about it; and Alma very soon arrived

at the meaning of it, and expressed it, succinctly if exaggeratedly, when she said to Lois one day,

“Lo, I’d give Auntie Mitt and Uncle Tony ten times over for half your mother.”

And Mrs Dare, understanding very clearly, had mothered them all alike so far as was possible. And her warm heart was large enough to take in the additional three without any loss, but rather gain, to her own four, and with benefit to the three which only the years were to prove.

The Luard youngsters, in short, had lived in circumstances so wide and easy that they had become somewhat self-centred, somewhat aloof from life less well-placed, somewhat careless of others so long as their own enjoyment of life was full and to their taste.

Auntie Mitt was not blind to it. In her precise little way she took upon herself—with justifiable misgiving that nothing would come of it—to point out to them that they were in danger of falling into the sin of selfishness. And, as she expected, her gentle remonstrances fell from them like water off lively little ducks’ backs.

Uncle Tony considered them the finest children in the world, would not hear a word against them, and spoiled them to his heart’s content and their distinct detriment.

Their association with the Dares saved them no doubt from the worst results of Uncle Tony’s mistaken kindness, but even Mrs Dare could not make angels of them any more than she could of her own four. She could only do her best by them all and leave them to work out their own salvation in their own various ways.

Connal Dare, the eldest of her own tribe, had been in the medical profession since the age of eight, when the game of his heart had been to make the other three lie down on the floor, covered up with tidies and shawls, while he inspected their tongues, and timed their pulses by a toy-watch which only went when he wound it, which he could not do while holding a patient's pulse. As he invariably prescribed liquorice-water, carefully compounded in a bottle with much shaking beforehand, and acid drops, the others suffered his ministrations with equanimity so long as his medicaments lasted, but grew convalescent with revolting alacrity the moment the supply failed.

Since then, true to his instinct, he had worked hard, and forced his way up in spite of all that might have hindered.

His father would have liked him with him in the business in St Mary Axe, but, perceiving the lad's bent, raised no objection, on the understanding that, as far as possible, he made his own way. And this Connal had succeeded in doing.

He was a sturdy, fair-haired, blue-eyed fellow, several inches shorter than Ray Luard but fully his match both in boxing and wrestling, as proved in many a bout before an admiring audience of five—and sometimes six, for the Colonel liked nothing better than to see them at it and bombard them both impartially with advice and encouragement.

Connal had overcome all obstacles to the attainment of his chosen career in similar fashion; had taken scholarship after scholarship; and all the degrees his age permitted, and had even paid some of his examination fees by joining the Army Medical Corps, which provided him not only with cash,

but also with a most enjoyable yearly holiday in camp and a certain amount of practice in his profession.

He had, however, long since decided that general practice would not satisfy him. He would specialise, and he chose as his field the still comparatively obscure department of the brain. There were fewer skilled workers in it than in most of the others. In fact it was looked somewhat askance at by the more pushing pioneers in research. It offered therefore more chances and he was most profoundly interested in his work in all its mysterious heights and depths.

At the moment he was the hard-worked Third Medical at Birch Grove Asylum, up on the Surrey Downs, and whenever he could run over to Willstead for half a day his mother eyed him anxiously for signs of undue depression or disturbed mentality, and was always completely reassured by his clear bright eyes, and his merry laugh, and the gusto with which he spoke of his work and its future possibilities.

With the approval and assistance of his good friend Dr Rhenius, who had attended to all the mortal ills of the Dares and Luards since they came to live in Willstead, he was working with all his heart along certain definite and well-considered lines, which included prospective courses of study at Munich and Paris. In preparation for these he was very busy with French and German, and for health’s sake had become an ardent golfer. His endless quaint stories of the idiosyncrasies of his patients showed a well-balanced humorous outlook on the most depressing phase of human life, and as a rule satisfied even his mother as to the health and well-being of his own brain.

It was just about the time that he settled on his own special course in life, and accepted the junior appointment at Birch Grove, that Alma Luard surprised her family by deciding that life ought to mean more than tennis and picnics and parties, and became a probationer at St Barnabas’s.

Lois, who came next, had a very genuine talent for music, and a voice which was a joy to all who heard it. For the perfecting of these she had now been two years at the Conservatorium at Leipsic and had lived, during that time, with Frau von Helse, widow of Major von Helse, who died in Togoland in 1890. Frau von Helse had two children,—Luise, who was also studying music, and Ludwig, lieutenant in the army. It was Ludwig’s obvious admiration for Lois, the previous summer,—when he had escorted her and his sister to Willstead for a fortnight’s visit to London in return for Frau von Helse’s great kindness to Lois during her stay in Leipsic—that had fanned into sudden flame the long-glowing spark of Ray Luard’s love for her.

Honor was Vic’s great chum and admirer. When Honor began going to St Paul’s School, Vic insisted on going also, and the experience had done her a world of good. Even Alma had been known to express regret that she had not had her chances. An exceedingly high-class and expensive boarding-school at Eastbourne had been her lot. An establishment in every respect after Auntie Mitt’s precise little heart, but comparison of Vic’s wider, if more democratic, experiences with her own eminently lady-like ones always roused in Alma feelings of vain and envious regret.