VINTAGE

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CORBETTS

NEVIL SHUTE

VINTAGE CLASSICS

Contents

About the Book

Nevil Shute wrote this prophetic novel just before the start of the Second World War. In it he describes the devastation that results from an aerial bomb attack on Southampton that destroys the city’s infrastructure and leaves the inhabitants at the mercy of cholera and further assaults. The story follows the trials and tribulations of the Corbett family as they try to get to safety.

About the Author

Nevil Shute Norway was born on 17 January 1899 in Ealing, London. After attending the Dragon School and Shrewsbury School, he studied Engineering Science at Balliol College, Oxford. He worked as an aeronautical engineer and published his first novel, *Marazan*, in 1926. In 1931 he married Frances Mary Heaton and they went on to have two daughters. During the Second World War he joined the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve where he worked on developing secret weapons. After the war he continued to write and settled in Australia where he lived until his death on 12 January 1960. His most celebrated novels include *Pied Piper* (1942), *No Highway* (1948), *A Town Like Alice* (1950) and *On the Beach* (1957).

Also by Nevil Shute

Novels

Marazan
So Disdained
Lonely Road
Ruined City
An Old Captivity
Landfall
Pied Piper
Pastoral
Most Secret
The Chequer Board
No Highway
A Town Like Alice
Round the Bend
The Far Country
In the Wet
Requiem for a Wren
Beyond the Black Stump
On the Beach
The Rainbow and the Rose
Trustee from the Toolroom
Stephen Morris and *Pilotage*

Autobiography
Slide Rule

NEVIL SHUTE

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VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PREFACE

THIS book was written in the year 1938 and published in April 1939, five months before the outbreak of the Second World War. At the time when it was written it was thought probable that war with Germany would come before long, and there was much activity in England over Air Raid Precautions. Most of these activities at that time were directed to countering bombing attacks by gas bombs, and there was little realisation by the public of the devastation that would be caused by high explosive or by fire.

At that time I was connected with the aircraft industry and so, perhaps, better informed than most authors on the potentialities of the various forms of air attack. I wrote this story to tell people what the coming bombing attacks would really be like, and what they really had to guard against. I was right in my guess that gas would not be used and in the disruption of civil life that would be caused by high explosives. I over-looked the importance of fire. I would like to think that the publication of this novel at that time did something to direct attention to the danger of disease. In this the publishers, William Heinemann Limited, did a good job for the country, for they distributed a thousand copies free of charge to workers in Air Raid Precautions, not as remainders but on publication day.

In this edition I have retained the Author's Note printed at the end of the book, because it seems to me to be of some historic interest.

NEVIL SHUTE

Good luck have thou with thine honour: ride on, because of the word of truth, of meekness, and righteousness; and thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things.

—Psalm 45

CHAPTER I

TOWARDS DAWN PETER Corbett got up from the garage floor and, treading softly, moved into the driving seat of the saloon. Presently he fell into a doze, his head bowed forward on his arms, upon the steering-wheel.

He woke an hour later, dazed and stiff. A grey light filled the little wooden building; it was early March. The rain drummed steadily upon the roof and dripped and pattered from the eaves with little liquid noises, as it had done all through the night. He stirred and looked around him.

Behind him, in the rear seat of the car, lay Joan, his wife, sleeping uneasily. She was dressed oddly in an overcoat, pyjama trousers, and many woolly clothes; her short fair hair had fallen across her face in disarray. On the seat beside her was the basket cot with little Joan; so far as could be seen, the baby was asleep.

He moved and looked out of the window of the car. Beside the car Sophie their nurse was lying on a Li-Lo on the oil-stained floor, covered with an eiderdown, sleeping with her mouth open and snoring a little. Beyond her there was another little bed, carefully screened between the garden roller and a box of silver sand for bulbs. From that the bright eyes of Phyllis, his six-year-old daughter, looked up into his own; beside her lay John, his three-year-old son, asleep.

Moving very quietly, he got out of the driving seat and stood erect beside the car; he had a headache, and was feeling very ill. From her bed upon the floor, Phyllis whispered:

‘Daddy. May I get up?’

‘Not yet,’ he said mechanically. ‘It’s not time to get up yet. Go to sleep again.’

‘Weren’t they *loud* bangs, Daddy?’

‘Very loud,’ he said. He moved over to the garage window and looked out. Everything seemed much the same, but he could not see beyond the garden.

‘Daddy, were the bangs loud enough to be heard in London?’

‘Not in London.’ He was feeling sick; his mouth was coated and dry.

‘Would the bangs have been heard in Portsmouth, Daddy?’

‘No. I don’t know.’

‘Anyway, they’d have been heard *all over* Southampton, wouldn’t they, Daddy?’

‘That’s right,’ he said patiently. So much, indeed, was evident. ‘But now, try to sleep again and don’t talk any more, or you’ll wake Mummy and John. There won’t be any more bangs now.’

He stepped carefully across the Li-Lo to the corner, and stooped over the little bed. He pulled the rug across her. ‘It’s not time to get up yet. Are you warm enough?’

‘Yes, thank you, Daddy. Isn’t it fun, sleeping in the garage?’

‘Great fun,’ he said soberly. ‘Now, go to sleep again.’

He moved quietly down the garage past the car, opened the door, and went out into the garden. His raincoat had half dried upon him in the night. He had no hat; the rain beat on his face and ruffled hair, and this refreshed him.

He lived in a semi-detached house, a large house in a good suburban road. It had a well-kept garden stretching out behind to the back road; the wooden garage was at the end remote from the house. He lived comfortably in a fairly modest style; he was the junior partner of Johnson, Bellinger, and Corbett, solicitors, in Southampton. He ran a medium-sized car which he had bought second-hand, and a

nine-ton cutter yacht which he had bought sixteenth-hand; these, with his three children, absorbed the whole of his income. He was thirty-four years old, a pleasant, ordinary young man of rather a studious turn.

He stood for a few moments in the garden in the rain, looking around. His house looked much the same as usual, so did the houses on each side of it. There was a window broken in a house a few doors down the road; otherwise he could see nothing wrong. He moved up the garden, opened the garden door, and went into his dining-room.

A sudden draught of cold air blew into his face, fluttering the papers on a table where the telephone was standing.

He frowned. There was a window open somewhere in the house. Someone had left it open in the confusion of the night—and on a rainy night like that! It was too bad.

He passed through the hall into the drawing-room in the front of the house. In fact, the windows were all open, but they had not been left open by the maids. The glass in every pane was cracked and shattered. Most of it had fallen inwards from the frames, and was lying on the floor. The rain streamed in through the great apertures, trickling down the furniture and making little pools upon the carpet. The settee, and Joan's easy chair, were drenched and sodden. Before the window the chintz curtains blew about, sopping and forlorn.

His lips narrowed to a line. 'Christ,' he said very quietly.

There was nothing to be done, and if there was, he was feeling too ill to do it. He turned from the ruined room, and went upstairs. A short inspection of the house showed him the extent of the damage; it was practically all confined to glass and damage from the rain. In the front of the house every pane of glass was shattered on the first and second floors; a few windows at the top remained intact. The back of the house was quite undamaged; the windows were unbroken and the rooms dry.

A clanging bell brought him to the nursery window in time to see a white ambulance go past the house at a considerable speed. He heard the brakes go on with violence as it passed him; it seemed to draw up down the road out of his sight. There was a commotion down there, noises of people and sounds that he could not place.

He turned from the window, went downstairs to the bathroom, opened the medicine cupboard on the wall, and took a couple of aspirins to ease his headache. Then he went down to the front door, opened it, and looked out.

The rain blew down the street in desolate great gusts; low over his head the grey clouds hurried past. Something peculiar about the houses opposite attracted his attention; he stared for a moment while a dull, tired brain picked up the threads. And then it came to him. Practically every window within sight was shattered like his own, and the rooms stood open to the rain.

He walked to the front gate, bare-headed in his raincoat, and looked down the road. A hundred yards away the ambulance was halted with a little crowd of people round it; they were putting a stretcher into it with care. It seemed to him that there were ruins there, as if the garden wall had fallen down on to the pavement. He knew what must have happened and it interested him; he went out of the gate and started down the road.

The ambulance moved off as he drew near. He knew the house, of course. He did not know their name. He knew them as an elderly couple who drove a very old Sunbeam car, with a married daughter who stayed with them intermittently with her children. As he came up the little crowd turned to disperse, and Corbett saw for the first time the results of a bomb.

It had fallen in the front garden. There was a shallow crater there, three or four feet deep. Bursting before it had had time to penetrate far into the ground, the force of the explosion had gone sideways. The garden wall of that house

and the next was nowhere to be seen; it was obliterated, lying in heaps of mould and shards of broken brick and mortar scattered the road. The front wall of the house had collapsed and had fallen in a great heap into the front garden, blocking the door and exposing dining-room and bedrooms to the air with all their furniture in place, much like an open doll's house. A portion of the roof had slipped and now hung perilously, swaying and teetering in the wind; from time to time a slate crashed to the ground.

His next-door neighbour was there, Mr. Littlejohn, a builder of houses out at Sholing. Corbett knew his neighbour fairly well over the garden wall, and liked his comfortable manner. But now the broad rubicund face was drawn and tired, and very serious.

Corbett asked, a little foolishly: 'Is anybody hurt?'

The builder turned to him. 'The maid. It's her they've just taken away. But I don't know if it was the explosion, or whether she had a fall getting down from her room. That's her room, the one at the top with the wash-stand. Doesn't look as if it had been touched now, does it?—barring the wall, of course.'

'Where was she?'

'Lying out in the garden here, all messed up.'

Corbett blinked. It seemed incredible. 'What happened to the old people?' he enquired.

'They're all right—but for the shock, of course. The blast must have been terrific in the house. See what it's done to all our windows. But they sleep at the back, so I suppose they were all right.'

'Are they in there now?'

Mr. Littlejohn shook his head. 'Mrs. Wooding's got them in her house—her that lives at Number 56. They'll be all right.'

He turned away. 'I tried to telephone the hospital, but my line's out of order. Is yours working?'

‘I haven’t tried it,’ said Corbett. ‘It was all right last night.’

‘I bet it’s not now.’

They turned, and walked together up the road towards their houses. ‘Well,’ said the builder heavily, ‘I got enough of this in the last war to last my lifetime. I didn’t never want to see it again.’

‘I was too young,’ said Corbett. ‘I’ve never seen anything like this before.’

‘Let’s hope you’ll never see it again.’ They walked on for a few paces in silence.

‘I didn’t know what to do,’ said Corbett. ‘Where did you go?’

The builder laughed shortly. ‘Soon as I realised what it was I got my missus out of bed and we went down to the cellar. And then I thought, maybe there’d be a sort of slanting hit—like that one—and the house would fall on top of us. So then we went upstairs again, and sat on the stairs outside our bedroom, because that way we got a room and two walls between us and the outside—see? But there—whatever you do may be wrong.’

‘I know,’ said Corbett. ‘We went out to the garage.’

‘To the garage?’

‘I was afraid of the house coming down. But if the garage walls blew down on us—well, it’s all light wooden stuff, and besides, the car would keep it off you. So we lay on the floor beside the car.’

The builder nodded slowly. ‘That’s all right. But when all’s said and done, there’s nothing to beat a trench. A seven foot trench so that your head gets right beneath the ground, but not so deep you may get buried in it. That’s what you want to get—a trench dug in the garden.’

They paused for a moment by the builder’s gate. ‘What’s it all about, anyway?’ asked Corbett dully. ‘Are we at war?’

The other shook his head. ‘I dunno.’

‘Who do you think it is we’re fighting?’

‘Blowed if I know. One or other of ’em. I suppose.’

Corbett went back into his house; before going out to rouse his family he poured himself out a whisky and soda. He stood for a few minutes in his dining-room drinking this, a weary and dishevelled figure in his sodden raincoat. Before him on the table was a copy of the *Evening News* of the night before, wide open at the centre page. His eyes fell on the cartoon. It represented the Prime Minister, very jocular, dangling a carrot before two donkeys separated from him by a wire fence. One of the donkeys had the head of Hitler, and the other, Mussolini.

Corbett remembered how they had laughed over it at dinner-time. It did not seem so very funny now.

He stared at the paper. He had bought it from the boy on the corner, on his way back from the office, as he always did. He had had an interesting day, and not too tiring. He had got home about half-past six and had been to see the children in their beds before they went to sleep, and played with them a little. Then he had gone down with Joan, and before dinner they had planned a new position for the sweet pea hedge, taking it off the wall and putting it between the garage and the lilac tree. She had showed him that the magnolia was coming out; they had talked about the errors of omission of the gardener, who came once a week. Then he had read the paper for a little; he remembered having heard during the day that all leave had been cancelled for the Fleet over at Portsmouth, because of the tension on the Continent. But there was always tension on the Continent, and leave had been cancelled many times before. There didn’t seem to be anything particularly alarming in the paper.

So they had gone in to dinner and talked about their holiday, wondering if it would be nice to take the car to Scotland this year, for a change. And after dinner there had been a concert of chamber music on the wireless; they had listened to that until the news came on at nine o’clock

when they switched off, having read the evening paper. Then they had played a game of cards together and had gone to bed a little after ten, to lie reading in their twin beds till half-past eleven. It was about that time that *Murder in Miniature* had slipped from his hand, and he had rolled over and put out his light.

The first bomb fell soon after that, before midnight.

The concussions were considerable—they must have been, because he could remember nothing from the time that he put out his light and settled down to sleep till he was standing at the window with Joan, his arm around her shoulders, peering out into the rainy night. The bursts, distant as they were, were rocking the house and setting things tinkling in the room.

'Peter, what can it be?' she had asked. 'They wouldn't be firing guns for practise at this time of night, would they?'

He had shaken his head. 'Not on a night like this. There's nothing for them to see.'

And suddenly she had cried: 'Oh, Peter! Look!'

He had looked, and he had seen a sheet of yellow flame perhaps a quarter of a mile away, outlining the roof-tops in silhouette. With that there came a shattering concussion, and another, and another, nearer every time.

'Oh, Peter!' she had cried. 'It hurts my ears!'

He had hurried her from the window; they crouched down on the floor beside the wardrobe at the far side of the room. 'Keep your hands pressed tight over your ears,' he had said. 'I think this must be an air-raid.'

That salvo passed; as soon as it was over she had insisted upon going upstairs to quieten the children and the nurse.

There was a lull, but the concussions continued intermittently in other parts of the city. He had to do some quick thinking then. Like most Englishmen of that time, he had read something about Air Raid Precautions in the newspapers. He knew, vaguely, that he had been advised to

make a gas-proof room, and he knew with certainty that he had done nothing about it. There had been something about buckets of sand for incendiary bombs, and something about oilskin suits for mustard gas. And there had been a great deal about gas-masks—in the newspapers, at any rate.

Quickly his mind passed in review the relative safety of the top room of the house, the cellar, and the garage. He did not think of staying on the stairs, as Littlejohn had done. It was more by instinct than by reasoning that he had decided on the garage, and hurried to the nursery to tell his wife.

The children had been terrified at the concussions, screaming at the top of their voices. In the turmoil he had given his orders to the woman in a firm, decisive manner, and had gone to carry rugs and bedding down the garden to the garage. A fresh salvo fell near at hand and set him cowering by the kitchen stove; in the middle of this all the lights in the street and the house went out. He heard, somewhere near at hand, the crash and rumble of falling masonry and the wailing of a siren on some ambulance or police car.

That salvo passed. In the lull that followed he went groping around in the pitch darkness, and got Joan and the nurse with the three children and all their bedding out of the nursery and down the garden in the rainy night to the garage. There he had made a bed for the two older children on the floor, protected by the garden, roller and the box of silver sand. Then he lay down upon the floor himself with the two women and the baby in the basket cot. He had brought a bottle of whisky from the house; he opened it and gave Joan and the nurse a drink. It made them feel a little better.

They had lain there all night on the damp, oily floor. The raid had gone on continuously till after three o’clock, the explosions sometimes distant, sometimes very near at

hand. The children had been crying for much of the time; the nurse had cried softly to herself most of the night.

It was over now. Corbett put his empty glass down on the table and stretched himself erect in the morning light; he was feeling more himself. It had been bad while it lasted. Now he must get the family indoors again and start cleaning up the mess, try and do something about the windows. After that, he must go down as soon as possible to see if everything was all right at the office. If he had time, it would be nice to find out if the country was at war and, if so, who the war was with.

He went first to the kitchen, to put on the kettle for a pot of tea before he brought them from the garage. The hot water boiler was alight, and the water was hot. That was a good first step; things weren't so bad, after all. He raked the boiler out and filled it up with coke. Then he filled the electric kettle at the hot-water tap and switched it on to boil while he went out to fetch them from the garage.

The indicator showed that no current was flowing to the kettle.

He jerked the mains switch once or twice without result; his lips set to a thin line. This was very bad. He did the whole of his cooking on an electric range; there was no gas in the house. He tried a light switch and a radiator plug; then he went to the front door and tried the bell. He looked at the main fuse in the box, which was intact. Very soon he had proved that there was no electricity supply at all.

He went into the dining-room and tried the telephone, to ring up the supply company. Like Littlejohn, he found the line was dead.

He searched around the kitchen but could not find an ordinary kettle in the house, though there were three electric ones. He filled a saucepan with hot water, took off the cooking disc from the hot-water boiler, and put the saucepan on; it would boil slowly there. He stood then for a minute thinking hard; there was the breakfast to be

cooked. Finally he shrugged his shoulders; there were only two alternatives for cooking, the dining-room or drawing-room fire. The drawing-room was uninhabitable with no windows; he went into the dining-room, laid the fire with paper, wood, and coal, and lit it.

Then he went out to fetch his family indoors.

A quarter of an hour later they were all in the dining-room, the children dressing by the fire, Joan beginning to consider breakfast. She had made a quick trip through the shattered rooms with him, and had retired to wash her face in warm water. She came down to find him wrestling with the fire, which had gone out and filled the room with smoke.

Sophie, their nurse, went straight up to her room and came down half an hour later, glum and silent.

He was half through lighting the fire for the second time when the front door was pushed open, and Mr. Littlejohn came in. 'Thought I'd just come in to see if you were quite all right,' he said. 'I did ring, but the bell's out of order.'

Corbett stood up, wiping his coal-stained hands. 'That's very nice of you,' he said. 'The bell works off the main. I've got no current in the house at all.'

'Neither have I,' said the builder, '—nor gas, either. Is your telephone working?'

Corbett shook his head. 'That's off, too. I tried to ring them up about the electricity. We do all our cooking by electricity. That's why I'm mucking about with this fire.'

The other nodded. 'It's the same with us. Got any water?'

The solicitor looked startled. 'Oh, yes. It's running at the tap all right.'

'Ah, but is it coming into the tank from the main, up at the top? That's what you want to watch.'

'I don't know. I never thought about that.'

The builder smiled. 'First thing I thought about, the water. But then, I been in the trade, you see—all my life.

Let me go up and have a look at the cistern, and I'll soon tell you.'

'Is yours off?'

'Aye.'

They went up to the attic; Corbett watched anxiously as Mr. Littlejohn depressed the ball-valve. 'Not a drop,' he said cheerfully. 'Just the same as mine. Dry as a bone—see?'

He got down from the cistern. 'That's what I came in about, really and truly,' he said. 'I wanted to be sure you knew about it, and not go lighting up the hot-water boiler, or having a hot bath, or anything of that. I been in the trade, and I know what to look for—see? So I thought I'd just pop in and see if things were all right. Hope you don't mind.'

'It's awfully good of you,' said Corbett. 'As a matter of fact, the boiler's going now. I keep it in all night. I'd better let it go out, hadn't I?'

'It's all right so long as you don't draw off any more hot water—or not very much. I wouldn't make it up again—let it go out natural.'

They went downstairs, looking at bedrooms and the drawing-room as they went. 'These windows are just terrible, of course,' said Corbett. 'I'll have to try and do something about them. I wish this bloody rain would stop.'

The builder nodded. 'I'm going down to my place, soon as I've had a bite to eat,' he said, 'to get a couple of my chaps up with some matchboarding to put over them temporarily till I get some glass cut. Do yours the same, if you like—while they're here.'

Corbett thanked him.

'Well, I'll be going along,' said Mr. Littlejohn. He paused by the door. 'One other thing,' he said. 'You haven't had no trouble with the drains?'

'Not that I know of. I haven't looked.'

They went to look. The downstairs water-closet pan was about half-full of a black liquid that undulated and changed level as they watched.

‘That’s bad,’ said Mr. Littlejohn, regarding it, fascinated. ‘That’s very bad, that is.’

‘Isn’t yours like that?’ asked Corbett.

‘It may be now. It wasn’t when I looked a quarter of an hour ago.’

‘What ought I to do about it?’

The builder scratched his head. ‘Don’t see that you can do anything about it, really and truly,’ he observed. ‘It’s flooding does that—pressure and flooding in the sewers; that didn’t ought to be there at all. But there—I suppose it’s all you can expect.’

He turned to Corbett. ‘I wouldn’t let any of them use this place,’ he said. ‘Not for an hour or two, till I find out how things are. You’ve got another one upstairs, haven’t you?’

They satisfied themselves that that one was all right.

Corbett walked with him to the door; the builder made him step outside into the rain. ‘Just between you and me, Mr. Corbett,’ he said: ‘there’s no sense in alarming people—ladies, and that. But what I mean is—the electricity and gas, they’re just an inconvenience, if you take my meaning. A bit of coal in the grate, and a good resourceful woman like my missus or Mrs. Corbett, and you’re right as rain. But the water—that’s different. You want to watch the water and not let them go wasting it, or flushing closets with it, or anything of that—not till we know where we are. You’ve got fifty gallons more or less in your cold cistern and another thirty in the hot-water tank, and that’s plenty to be going on with. But it’s not enough for all the house to have a bath, or let run to waste. Not till we know how things are. I mean, when it’s going to start running again.’

Corbett nodded. ‘That’s true. Thanks very much for the tip.’

The builder said: ‘I just been a walk. You been down Salisbury Road yet?’

‘Not this morning.’

‘There’s a house down there—it’s terrible, Mr. Corbett. Really and truly. I never seen anything like it—not even in the war—not from one shell, that is. Still, what I meant to say was this. Two of them fell in the road, one at the far end and another a little bit this way. Well, the one at the far end, the water main’s bust for sure. There’s a regular fountain coming up, properly flooding the place. And it’s not running away, neither—like it should. That looks as if the surface drains is crushed.’

There was a momentary silence.

‘You see, Mr. Corbett, a lot of people, they forget about the water. It don’t give no trouble in the ordinary way, and you don’t think. But once the mains is cracked, they take a power of a lot of getting right again. Water ain’t like electricity, where you can string a bit of wire along on poles to the house and everything’s all right. Water’s water, and it takes a long time to get the mains in order once they’re cracked.’

‘And where one of them bombs has fallen,’ he said soberly, ‘it’ll all be cracked. Water and gas and sewers—all mixed up together.’

Corbett went back into his house and told Joan about the water. She wrinkled her brows. ‘We’ll have to get it put right before to-night,’ she objected.

‘There’s the children’s baths. Phyllis and John could go without, perhaps, but baby must have hers.’

‘I should think you might take a little in a basin for baby. The other two will have to go dirty.’ He went on to tell her about the drains. ‘I’ll see if it’s possible to do anything about the water to-day,’ he said. ‘But in the meantime, we’ll just have to go slow on what we’ve got.’

‘I suppose so,’ she said wonderingly. ‘Seems funny, doesn’t it? Here, come and eat your breakfast.’ She leant

over the smoking fire, and transferred a couple of rather smutty eggs from the frying-pan to a luke-warm plate.'

He asked: 'Where's Annie?' They had a daily maid who came in before breakfast.

'She hasn't turned up yet. I hope her rabbit dies.'

She busied herself about the grate; he sat down with the children to the meal. Phyllis asked him:

'Daddy. Are we going to sleep in the garage again to-night?'

He was startled. The possibility had not occurred to him before. 'I don't think so,' he said. 'Not unless the bangs start coming again.'

His answer was digested in silence for a minute. Then: 'Daddy, if the bangs come again, may I take Teddy to bed with me in the garage?'

'May I take Horsey, Daddy?' asked his son.

'Why—yes,' he said patiently. Joan came to his rescue.

'Get on and eat your breakfasts,' she said. 'You've not eaten anything. If you don't eat your breakfasts up, Daddy won't let anybody sleep in the garage to-night.'

That finished them for the rest of the meal. Corbett got up from the table, lit a cigarette. He said: 'I must get down to the office right away. I want to see how things are there. If anything's happened to our files and records—there'll be awful trouble.'

'You can't go down without having a shave,' said Joan. 'Make yourself tidy, dear. This water will be hot in a minute.'

He stared at her in wonder. 'I must be off my head,' he said at last. 'Fancy thinking of going down to work without having shaved. . . .' He rubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin.

She pressed his arm. 'Don't worry. I expect everything will be all right down there.'

Twenty minutes later, spruce and neat in his business suit, bowler hat, and dark overcoat, and carrying a neatly

furled umbrella on his arm, he came to her again.

‘I’m off now,’ he said. ‘I can’t ring you up because the phone’s out of order—I’ll try and get that put right. I’ll be back to lunch if I possibly can, but don’t worry if I’m not.’

She stood for a moment in thought. ‘Candles,’ she said at last. ‘We’ll have to have some candles if the electricity isn’t going to be on to-night. The milk hasn’t come yet, either. We take three and a half pints. If it doesn’t come. I’ll have to go and get it, but I don’t want to leave the house.’

He nodded. ‘Candles and milk.’

She turned to him. ‘I tell you what would be a godsend, if you could get it. A Primus stove—like we have on the boat. And a kettle to go on it—and paraffin and meths, of course.’

‘I’ll do what I can. I’d better take the car.’

She reached up and kissed him. ‘There’s sure to be an awful lot of other things,’ she said. ‘Come back for lunch, if you can.’

‘All right. Turn on the wireless and see if you can get any news out of it while I’m away.’

She frowned. ‘I’ll try, but is it any good? I thought that worked off the mains?’

He had forgotten that.

He went down the garden to the garage, got the car, and drove to his office in Cumberland Place. He was appalled at what he saw. In Westwood Road he passed a house that had suffered a direct hit; above the first floor there was very little left of it. He went on, sober and a little sick, and stopped once more to inspect a crater in the road where there had been a motor-car. After that he did not stop again.

He had to make two detours to avoid roads that were blocked with bomb-holes.

The streets were full of people. Most of them seemed to be looking around, viewing the damage before they went on to their work. There was a sort of stunned bewilderment