

Title

LANDFALL
A Channel Story

By

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PeBook, 2014

About this eBook

“*Landfall – A Channel Story*” by Nevil Shute

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ISBN 978-961-6944-83-0 (pdf)

ISBN 978-961-6944-84-7 (mobi)

ISBN 978-961-6944-85-4 (ePub)

PeBook

Popular eBooks Publishing Co.

Menges, Slovenia

[Email](#)

Website: [PeBook](#)

Published in electronic format, September, 2014 by PeBook - Popular eBooks Publishing Co.
Available electronically at: *eBookstore Bird*

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Landfall - A Channel Story

I

The car, a chilly little open roadster, drew away from the dim bulk of the dance hall. It accelerated with a crescendo of noise quite disproportionate to its performance and made off down the sea front, its one masked headlamp showing a feeble glimmer in the utter darkness. Presently it took a turning through the park towards the town. The steady rumble of the engine became intermittent; then there was a crashing report and a sheet of yellow flame from the exhaust pipe. It drew up to a standstill underneath the trees.

In the cramped seat the driver was conscious of the girl's shoulder pressed against his own; only his heavy coat prevented him from feeling the warmth of her thigh. He turned to her. "I don't know what's the matter with it," he said. "It won't go any more."

She said, "Oh, yes, it will. Start it up again."

He said, "I'll try if you like. But I don't think it'll go. It does this sometimes."

"Go on, and start it."

He pushed the starter. The lights, already dim, went down to a dull red glow and the worn engine turned feebly. "It won't go," he said, and there was a hint of laughter in his voice. "It's the rain or something."

She stirred beside him. "I can get a bus from the corner."

He said, "Don't go. There's a horse coming in a minute."

"What horse?"

"The horse that's coming to tow us home. It won't be long now. You can give it a lump of sugar, but you must hold your hand flat. Otherwise you lose a finger."

There was a light rain falling. In the darkness beneath the flapping fabric of the hood she stared at him. “Whatever are you talking about?”

“The horse. You can stroke its nose, if you like. I’ll hold it for you.”

“Where are you going to get a horse from?”

He said, “It’ll turn up. We’ve only got to sit here for a little while, and it’ll come.”

“I’ll sit here till the next bus comes.”

“All right. What’s your name?”

She hesitated. “You want to know everything, don’t you?”

“Well, it’s not much to ask. You’re going to spend the night with me, and you won’t tell me your name.”

She was startled and upset. “I don’t know what you mean,” she said. She fumbled for the handle of the door.

There was laughter in his voice. “Well, you said you’d stay here till the next bus came. It’s after half-past twelve—there won’t be any more till morning. So you’ll have to sit here all night. I do think you might tell me your name.”

She relaxed. “You do say the most awful things!”

“What have I done now? You’ve done nothing but pull me up all evening.”

“You know what you said.”

“I know. I asked you to tell me your name, and you won’t tell me. I believe you’re an enemy alien and you think I’ll put the police on you.”

“I’ll put the police on you if you don’t take me home.”

“I promise you I’ll take you home the minute the horse comes. In the meantime, I do think you might tell me who you are.”

She giggled. “You’ve seen me often enough.”

“I know I have. That’s what’s worrying me.”

“I know who you are.”

He turned to her, immensely conscious of her presence. “Do you?”

She nodded. “You come from Emsworth aerodrome. They call you Jerry, don’t they?”

“Oh—yes. Everybody calls me Jerry. How did you know that?”

“Never you mind. What’s Jerry short for? Gerald?”

“No—just a name. The real one is Roderick Chambers. But you may call me Jerry. Tell me, what is your name? I’ve told you mine.”

She relented. “Mona Stevens.”

“Mona.” He paused, and then he said, “That’s rather a nice name.”

She was pleased. “It is, isn’t it? I mean, there aren’t so many Monas about. Better than being called Emily, or something of that.”

He turned to her. “Tell me, where do you work?”

She laughed at him. “Think hard.”

“I am thinking. You aren’t the old charwoman who cleans out my bedroom, by any chance?”

“No, I’m not.”

“I thought not. It’s a pity.”

She turned the subject. “I know what you had for supper tonight,” she said.

He stared at her. “What did I have?”

“Steak and chips, and then you had a bit of Stilton cheese. And you had about three half cans of bitter.”

He said, astonished, “You’re a clairvoyant.” She shook her head. “Then you smelt my breath.”

She turned her head away. “Don’t be so rude.”

He thought for a minute. “Well then, you were in the Royal Clarence tonight, anyway.” Recollection came to him in a wave. “Of course. You work at the Royal Clarence—in the snack bar.”

She mocked him. “Aren’t you ever so quick?”

He said weakly, “I knew that all the time, of course. I was just pulling your leg.”

“You do tell stories.”

“No—honestly. You don’t think I’m the sort of chap who goes to the Pavilion to pick up girls, do you?”

“Well, what else did you go to the Pavilion for?”

He said loftily, “I went there to dance.”

She bubbled into laughter. “I’d like to have seen you dancing with them other officers you came in with.”

“You don’t quite understand. We had a party all fixed up; the ladies were to meet us there. There was Ginger Rogers and Merle Oberon and Loretta Young—oh, and several others. Greta couldn’t come.”

She said, a little doubtfully, “I don’t believe you. What happened to them?”

“They didn’t turn up. So then I looked around and you were the only person in the room I knew, so I asked you if you’d dance with me.”

“You do tell ’em. You never recognized me at all.”

He said, “You hurt me very much when you talk like that.”

“It’d take ground glass to hurt you.”

A little shift of wind blew a few drops of rain from off the dripping hood in onto the girl. “Here,” she said. “It’s raining in all over me. Go on, and take me home.”

“The horse will be here in a minute—then we’ll all go home together. You can have a ride on it, if you like. Look, I’ve got a rug here.” He reached round to the little space behind the seats, dragged a rug out between their shoulders, and arranged it over her. It was quite necessary to reach round her back to do so; she moved a little closer to him and his arm remained around her shoulders.

She said, “What do you do out at the aerodrome?”

He said, “Fly aeroplanes.”

“That’s what them wings on your chest mean, isn’t it?”

“That’s it. I carry them as spares.”

“Are you a squadron leader, or something?”

He said, “Or something. I’m a flying officer.”

“What sort of things do you do when you go flying? Have you shot down any Germans?”

“They don’t come near these parts, thank God. All we do is go out over the sea and report what ships we see.”

“It must be frightfully exciting.”

“We get bored to tears.”

He turned to her; they drew a little closer. “You’ve not been at the Royal Clarence very long, have you?”

“Six months. You don’t notice, that’s what’s the matter with you.”

He said, “We won’t go into that again. What did you do before that?”

“Worked in the corset factory—Flexo’s. I got there when I come away from school, and stayed there ever since. But that’s no kind of life, in the factory all day. I was always onto my old man about it, and last year he said, well, I was twenty-one and I could please myself. So then I went to Mr. Williams at the Royal Clarence because my uncle knows him at the Darts Club, and he spoke to the manager for me. So then I started in the snack bar.”

“It’s more fun there, I should think, than making corsets all day long.”

“Ever so much. But then, I wasn’t on the corsets. I was on bras.”

He said innocently, “What’s the difference?”

“Why—a bras is what you ...” She checked herself. “You know well enough what it is. You’re just being awful.”

In the warm darkness underneath the rug his arm reached round her shoulders and his hand lay at her side. He moved his fingers. “Honestly, I don’t know what it is. Is this one?”

“No, it’s not. Give over, or I’ll get out and walk home.”

“I only wanted to find out.”

“Well, look in the papers. There’s pages of them in the advertising.”

“I don’t read the advertisements. I think they’re low.”

“Not half so low as what you’re doing now. Give over, or I will get out and walk. Really and truly.”

“It’s raining—you’ll get soaked.”

“That’ll be your fault.”

“You’ll get double pneumonia, and die. You’ve not got enough clothes on to go wandering round the streets at this time of night, in a howling blizzard.”

“Never you mind what I’ve got on—it’s nothing to do with you.”

“Have it your own way. I was going to buy you a beautiful ermine cloak trimmed with— with birds of paradise. Still, if you take that line, I’ll have to get you something else. What about a stick of Southsea Rock?”

“You do talk crazy. I don’t believe you’ve got a stick of Southsea Rock, nor an ermine cloak, either.”

He said, “I’ve got a cigarette.”

With a number of contortions they managed to light cigarettes without disturbing the position of his arm, which lay around her shoulders; their movements shuffled them closer together. For a few minutes they sat smoking quietly.

A figure loomed up on the pavement beside Chambers, a figure in a tin hat and a dripping raincoat. It paused beside the little car; from the driver’s seat the young man recognized an air raid warden on his rounds.

The warden said, “I should move on and go home now, if I was you. Getting a bit late, isn’t it?”

Chambers said, “I can’t. The car’s broken down. We’re waiting here till a horse comes along to tow us home.”

“You don’t suppose I’ll swallow that one, do you?”

“Well, the lady did. If it’s good enough for her, it’s good enough for you.”

The warden coughed, and spoke into the car. “I should make him take you home now, Miss.”

The girl did not speak. Chambers said, “I think you’d better go away and leave off bothering us.”

The warden thrust his thumbs into his belt. He was fifty-six years old, and an accountant in his working hours. He said, “No parking allowed on these common roads after blackout. We got to keep them clear, in case of fire engines, and that. You’ll have to move along. You can park in the Station Yard if you’re going on all night.”

He had played his trump card, and he knew it. Reluctantly Chambers reached out to the starter switch; the engine turned feebly and began to fire on three cylinders; presently the fourth chipped in. The pilot withdrew his arm from the girl’s shoulders. “I think he’s got us there,” he said. “We’ll have to go.”

She nodded. “He’s got a nerve,” she said in a low voice. “Nothing to do with him.”

Chambers said, equally low, "It's not worth a row. Besides, he's right about these roads. There's a notice up about it."

He let in the clutch, and the car moved away. The girl drew the rug about her, and sat a little more erect. They drove into Portsmouth in the utter darkness, a town without street lights or lit windows. The dim light of his one shaded headlamp lit the road immediately before them; everything else was black and silent.

He found her house at last, a building at the corner of a shabby street. It seemed to be a second-hand furniture shop in rather a poor way; he drew up by the side door of the shop.

She said, "I had a lovely evening, ever such fun. Thank you ever so much for bringing me home."

He said, "I'm glad Ginger Rogers couldn't come. You dance much better."

"You do talk soft."

"Would you like to do it again?"

"All right."

"What about tomorrow?"

"If you like. Same time, at the Pavilion?"

"I'll have to shake off Loretta Young, but I can get rid of her all right. I'll tell her I've got chicken pox. Half-past ten?"

"All right."

"Is this where I kiss you?"

"No, it's not."

"You're wrong."

Presently she got out of the car and stood for a moment in a shadowy doorway, slim and erect, waving him good night. He started up the worn engine of the little roadster again, and drove out of the city onto the country roads.

The girl pulled the door behind her and bolted it, turned out the flickering gas jet, and went up the narrow stairs to her room. She trod softly on the oilcloth and shut her door furtively behind her, because she did not want to wake her mother. Her mother never minded who she went about with, but liked her to be home by midnight.

She had a room to herself, being the only one of the children still at home. Her brother Bert was in the Navy, a leading seaman in *Firedrake*; he was away from England. They thought he was somewhere in the South Atlantic; it was six weeks since they had heard from him. It had had to be the Navy, of course. Her father had served for nearly thirty years, finishing up as a chief petty officer. He had a small pension, and the shop made a profit of a few shillings a week, enough for them to get along on.

Millie, her sister, had shared the room with her till the beginning of the war; she had been working at the corset factory. A panic reduction had thrown Millie out of work with a hundred and fifty other girls; she had then joined the A.T.S. and was doing canteen work at Camp Bordon. She looked very smart in her khaki uniform; Mona sometimes regretted that she had not done the same. But it was more fun in the snack bar, with everybody having a good time, and all the officers drinking with their ladies, and that.

The room was cold; she undressed quickly and jumped into bed. Was that a bras, indeed! The cheeky thing! Probably he only said it to tease her. She never had heard anybody talk so silly, but it was fun being out with him. She was glad he had asked her to dance again. He was ever so tall, six foot two at least; the long blue greatcoat and the little blue forage cap stuck sideways on his black hair made him look taller still. She thought he was older than she was, twenty-three or twenty-four perhaps. He had a very young face, with pink cheeks.

She liked him. She was glad to be going out with him again; it was something to look forward to.

Jerry, they called him.

Very soon she was asleep.

Ten miles away Chambers turned his noisy little car in at the gateway leading to the officers' mess, and parked it in the open-sided garage barn. He draped the rug over the radiator in case of frost, and went into the mess. It was a good mess, a solid building of red brick designed by a good architect and put up about ten years previously. It was overcrowded now; the aerodrome accommodated five squadrons instead of the two that had been the establishment in peacetime. A cluster of bedroom huts were springing up on what had been the tennis courts, but Chambers had a bedroom in the original building. He had been there since he had left Cranwell, three years previously.

There was still one light burning in the anteroom; he crossed the room and studied the operations board. The weather report for the morning was there; cloud ten tenths at a thousand feet. Sleepily he made a grimace; still, it was December and you couldn't expect much else. He scanned the other notices on the board. Battle practice in Area SQ from 1200 to 1400—that wouldn't worry him. Experimental flying in Area TD at 1000—that might be interesting. AA gunnery practice from Departure Point in Area SL—that was off his beat. There was nothing that concerned him.

He looked at his watch; it was half-past one. He went up to his room.

His room was comfortable enough, though furnished with a Spartan simplicity. There was an iron bedstead with a clean white counterpane; his batman had turned down the bed and put out his pyjamas. The walls were cream distempered, and the paint was grey. There was a small basin with running water, a small radiator and a large, painted tallboy for his clothes. There was a double photograph of his father and mother on the mantelpiece, and a couple of detective novels. There was a large deal table in the window, and most of his private life revolved around this table.

He kept his letters in its drawers, and his fountain pen, and his bottle of ink, and all the oddments that he would have liked to carry with him in his pockets if it had not been for spoiling the set of his tunic. On it stood his wireless set, a jumble of valves, chokes and condensers on a plain deal board innocent of any covering. He had put it together himself; it got America beautifully. Beside it was his galleon. He had bought the kit of parts to make the galleon a couple of months previously and he was laboriously rigging the yards with cotton thread according to the words of the book, and painting it with the little pots of brightly coloured pigments supplied with the kit. It was about half finished.

He ran his eyes over it lovingly; he liked the delicate, finishing work with his fingers. It was fun to work at, in his long leisure hours. He had thought of calling it the Santa Maria; that was what the book told you to paint under the stern gallery. Mona Lisa would go as well, he thought, and it would leave a little more room for the lettering. Mona.

He switched on all the switches that controlled the wireless set, and tuned it in to Schenectady. He heard a dance band faintly, overlaid with background noise and echoes of Morse, and got his customary thrill out of it. The room was cold; he slung his gasmask over the back of a chair and started to undress.

In bed, he twitched the string that ran ingeniously round the picture moulding to the switch at the door, and pulled the cold sheets round him. She was a decent kid, that Mona. He had danced at the Pavilion several times before, but had never wanted to meet his partners again; usually he had been only too glad to get rid of them. This one was different. She was dumb as a hen, of course, but all girls seemed to be like that. It would be fun to spend another evening dancing with her, provided no one from the mess happened to see them. He didn't want to get his leg pulled.

Perhaps it was better, after all, to stick to beer.

He thought of her again, remembered the feel of her shoulders, and drifted into sleep, smiling a little.

Five hours later he woke up with a start, as his batman snapped the light on at the door. The man put a cup of tea beside his bed. "Half-past six, sir," he said. "Been raining in the night, I see, but it's stopped now."

The pilot sat up in his bed, and took the cup. "What's the wind like?"

"Blowing a bit from the northeast." The man took his boots and went out of the room, leaving the light on.

Chambers got up, shaved and dressed, and went down to the dining room. At one end of one of the long tables there were three or four young men at breakfast, served by a sleepy waitress of the W.A.A.F. It was still dark outside and the curtains were still drawn; in the cold light of a few electric bulbs the meal was cheerless and uncomfortable. He pulled a chair out, and sat down to porridge.

Somebody said, "Morning, Jerry. What time did you get home?"

"Half-past one."

The other said, "I saw you—you were doing nicely. I got fed up, and left."

The conversation flagged; the pilots ate hurriedly and in silence. They had been on the morning patrol now for a month, and they were sick of it. With the late, dark mornings and the cold weather the patrol over the sea was unattractive, boring in the extreme, and a little dangerous. There had been losses in the squadron, unromantic, rather squalid deaths of pilots who had miscalculated their fuel and had been forced down in the winter sea to perish of exposure or by drowning. To set against the black side of the picture there were only long strings of meaningless statistics gleaned each day, the names and nationalities of ships within their area, the course and the position of each. It was uninspiring, clerical work, meaningless until it reached the Commanders R.N. in the Operations Room who daily made up the great mosaic of the war at sea.

This was the last morning patrol that the flight were to do. Tomorrow they would have a change of timetable, and would take on the afternoon patrol over the same areas of sea.

"Like the bloody threshing horse that takes a holiday by going round the other way," said Chambers. In the three months since the beginning of the war, nobody in the squadron had seen an enemy ship, or fired a gun, or dropped a bomb in anger.

The pilots finished their breakfast, pulled on their heavy coats, and went down to the hangar. The machines were already out upon the tarmac with their engines running; grey light was stealing across the sodden aerodrome. In the pilot's room the young men changed into their combination flying suits, pulled on their fur-lined boots, buckled the helmets on their heads. The machines they were flying were enclosed monoplanes with twin engines; in summer they would dispense with helmets. Now they wore them for warmth.

Each machine carried a crew of four, an officer, a sergeant as second pilot, a wireless telegraphist, and an air gunner. They carried two one-hundred-pound bombs and a number of twenty-pound, and had fuel for about six hours' flight.

The officers gathered round the flight lieutenant, armed with their charts, and heard the latest orders. Then they separated, and went to their aircraft. The crews were standing by and the engines were running. One by one they got into the machines and settled into their places; the doors were shut behind them. There were four machines in the patrol. Engines roared out as each pilot ran them up, chocks were waved aside, and the machines taxied out to the far hedge and took off one by one in the cold dawn.

Chambers sat tense at the controls during the long take-off. He knew the machine well, but with full load it was all that she could do to clear the hedge at the far end. It was easier than usual today; they had the long run of the aerodrome and there was a fair wind. He pulled her

off the ground at eighty miles an hour three hundred yards from the hedge and held her near the grass as she gained speed. Then he nudged Sergeant Hutchinson beside him, who began to wind the undercarriage up with the old-fashioned, cumbersome hand gear.

From time to time, as they gained height, the sergeant paused in his task to wipe his nose. He had a streaming cold in the head, and he was feeling rather ill. By rights he should not have been flying, but the squadron were temporarily short of pilots, having despatched a number to the Bombing Command.

Behind the sergeant, the young white-faced wireless operator unreeled his aerial and made the short test transmission that he was allowed before relapsing into wireless silence, only to be broken by orders from his officer in an emergency. He sat with headphones on his head, searching the wave length with the knob of his condenser, sleepy and bored and cold. Behind him the corporal gunner sat in the turret playing with the gun. As they passed out over the beach, the corporal fired a long burst into the water to test the gun; the clatter mingled strangely with the droning of the engines. Then he sat idly on the little seat in the cramped turret, scanning the misty, grey, and corrugated sea.

Chambers passed over the control to Hutchinson, and moved from his seat to the little chart table. He gave a course to the sergeant, who set it on the compass. They flew on out over the Channel, flying at about seven hundred feet, below a misty layer of cloud. Very soon they lost sight of the other machines, each having taken its own course.

The young man sat at the chart table, staring out of the large windows of the cabin. He had an open notebook before him; on the vacant page he had written the date, the time of taking off, and the time of departure from the coast. In the grey morning light the visibility was very poor; unless they were to pass right over a ship it was unlikely that they would see it. They were all on the lookout; there was nothing else to do.

They flew on for an hour, gradually growing cold. The wireless operator was the first to feel it as a bitter privation. He was a pale-faced lad of nineteen with a home in Bermondsey; he had little stamina and hated the monotony of the patrol. He had nothing to do, ever. The rules against transmitting on the wireless were rigorous, and could only be broken in emergency; in the three months of the war they had not suffered an emergency. In three months he had done no useful work at all, and he was sick of it. For this reason he hated the patrol, and felt the cold more than any of them.

Chambers moved back into the first pilot's seat. "See the Casquets pretty soon," he said. The sergeant nodded his agreement.

Five minutes later Hutchinson plucked his arm, and pointed downwards. The young officer craned over, and saw through the grey mist a small black rock awash in the sea, with white surf breaking on it. Then there was a long black reef, then nothing but the sea again.

Chambers said, "For the love of Mike, don't lose it. Shove her round." He moved back to the chart table, and bent over the chart. It might be Les Jumeaux, or a bit of Alderney. He set a new course as they circled round the reef; the sergeant steadied on it. Very soon an island rose out of the mist, rocky and barren, with a lighthouse on it.

The machine turned away, and took a course back for the coast of England, flying upon a course ten miles to the west of their flight out. It was their job to cover the whole area in strips, so that at the end of their five hours' patrol they would have an accurate report of everything that floated in their zone. In theory, that was, for on mornings like the present one they could see barely half a mile on each side of their path.

They saw a ship before they reached the English coast, a collier with the letters *NORGE* painted on her side. They circled her and swept low by her stern to read the name, the *HELGA*. Then they resumed their flight. The young officer produced a bottle of peppermint bull's-eye; they all had one, with a drink of hot coffee from the thermos flasks. The drink and

the hot sweet refreshed them and brought back a part of their efficiency; they were all suffering a lassitude from the raw cold.

They made their landfall, and turned back to the French coast. Backwards and forwards they went as the grey morning passed, tired and bored and numb. From time to time they saw a ship and noted the particulars, the name, the nationality, the course, and the speed. In the gun turret the corporal was sunk into a coma of fatigue. On and on they went, hour after hour. Presently Chambers began to watch the clock above the chart table; soon he would be able to turn for home.

At half-past eleven they left the area, at noon they crossed the English coast again. As they passed the long, deserted beaches the four machines of the outgoing patrol passed by them on their starboard hand; Chambers waggled his wings in salute. Then they were above the aerodrome. The sergeant lowered the wheels for landing and the pilot put the machine into a gliding turn above the hangars. They made a wide sweep and approached the hedge; the flaps went down and the ground came up to meet them very quickly. The pilot waited his moment and then pulled heavily upon the wheel; the monoplane touched ground smoothly but decisively and ran on at a great speed. Chambers jerked up the lever that controlled the flaps, waited a moment, and checked her gently on the brakes. She ran for several hundred yards; then she was slow enough for him to turn in to the hangars.

He switched off the engines, and an aircraftsman came up and opened the cabin door. In the machine no one was in a hurry to get out. They were too tired and too stiff to make a move at once. The corporal unloaded the gun and put the magazines away; the wireless operator sat listless at his little desk. The sergeant was entering the flying time and details of the flight in the log books. The pilot made a few pencilled notes in his book, and collected his charts.

Back in the pilots' room he slowly stripped off his flying clothing before the stove. The other three were there already, writing their reports. Matheson said, "See anything?"

"Not a bloody thing." The pilot shivered a little as he wriggled out of the combination suit. "A lot of sea, and one or two mouldy ships."

He turned to the stove. Behind his back the door opened and the flight lieutenant came into the little room, fresh-faced young man of twenty-five, called Hooper.

Matheson said, "Jerry didn't see anything. What's it all about, anyway?"

"Blowed if I know."

Chambers turned towards him. "Has something happened?"

The newcomer shrugged his shoulders. "There's a cag on about something—I can't find out what it is. You didn't see anything?"

"I saw one or two ships." He reached for his notebook; the flight lieutenant looked over his shoulder. They ran down the list of names, times, and locations.

"There's nothing in those," said Hooper. "Nothing unusual?"

"Not a thing. There never is."

"Well, something's happened. The Navy are creating about something."

The pilot turned back to the stove and huddled his chilled body over it. "Blast the Navy," he said petulantly. "They've always got a moan."

The flight lieutenant took the notebook and went over to the squadron leader's office. "Jerry's just come in, sir. Here's his book. He saw nothing out of the ordinary."

Peterson took the book and ran his eye down the list of ships. "Damn," he said very quietly. "Didn't anybody see the Lochentie?"

"The Lochentie?"