

Title

# **ORDEAL**

**By**  
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## **About this eBook**

“Ordeal” by Nevil Shute

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## **Ordeal**

### **1**

Towards dawn Peter Corbett got up from the garage floor and, treading softly, moved into the driving seat of the car. 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 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 go 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 his 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 intact 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 dulled, 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, bareheaded 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 onto 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 with her children intermittently. 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 in 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 washstand. 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 realized 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 whiskey 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 eye 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 radio; 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 practice 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 quiet 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 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 women 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 whiskey 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 to 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 main 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 base 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