

Last Day

A. Bertram Chandler

FADE IN TO DISTANT CHIMING of church clock, to seven slow, solemn strokes. There is a short pause, followed by the subdued creaking of a mattress as the man shifts and stirs in his bed. Then--

JOHN (*sleepily*). Seven already. And it's light. (*His voice becomes more alert, a little querulous.*) Why didn't you set the alarm, Evelyn? I wanted to be up early. I wanted to see the sun rise. I wanted...

EVELYN (*bitterly*), I wanted, too. I wanted all kinds of things. I wanted you with me, just ourselves, as long as possible. I wanted you to sleep all through today, all through the night that's coming, so that they couldn't find you and you would miss this craziness. But now (*her voice takes on a strained cheerfulness*) I suppose you want your breakfast.

JOHN (*rather surprised, as though the idea is brilliantly novel*). Why, yes.

EVELYN. In bed?

JOHN (*surprised and gratified*). Thank you, darling.

Fade in to sizzling frying pan, then footsteps on stairs, then door opening.

EVELYN (*still with the same forced gaiety*). There you are, m'lud. Sunny side up, two, with crisp bacon. And...

JOHN. 'M'lud.' Funny you should say that. Reminds me of something else...

EVELYN (*sharply*). What?

JOHN. Trials and things. The Old Bailey. The condemned man ate a hearty breakfast...

EVELYN. The condemned man... John, John!

There is a crash as of breaking crockery, a sound of a woman's sobbing. And--

JOHN. There, darling, there. Don't worry about it. It was a silly joke. Do you suppose I'd have made it if it wasn't meant to be a joke? We're no more condemned men than Brown and Alcock, or the Wright brothers. Less so. *They* had to make up the rules as they went along; we already have a mass of theory and practice to work on. And look--you've broken the teapot. You never liked it, did you?

EVELYN (*with a laugh that is very close to a sob*), No. It was an ugly thing. But what a mess I've made of your eggs, darling. And they'll be your last eggs, too. The last for a few days, I mean. Why can't you take eggs? The acceleration?

JOHN. No. Properly stowed, they'll stand anything that *we* can stand. It's just the old, old story of Mass Ratio. It means that we have to cut down weight as much as possible. It means dehydrated foods...

EVELYN. And powdered egg omelets...

JOHN. There you are, now. You've got it. It just means a few days of discomfort, of putting up with unpleasant sensations and unappetizing food. There'd be far more danger in an expedition to either of the poles or the South American jungle.

EVELYN. Except that polar explorers know what to expect.

JOHN. So do we, What do we have astronomers for?

There is the sound of somebody knocking--gently at first, then with increasing violence.

JOHN. Peep out of the window, Don't let 'em see you. Who is it?

EVELYN. Looks like reporters.

JOHN. So they've tracked us down. Hell! What ...?

EVELYN. Get dressed quickly. There's no one at the back yet. And the car's round there. We might make a getaway. (*Her voice comes clearly but faintly as she shouts to those below.*) He's still in bed. He's just getting up.

REPORTER. We'll be waiting, Mrs. Kent. And perhaps you wouldn't mind answering a few questions. What...?

There is the sound of a window being violently closed, Fade in to noise of self starter, to roar of violently accelerating engine. There are angry shouts the sound of the swift and violent passage of a wheeled vehicle. The latter fades.

FIRST REPORTER (*indignantly*). Gawd! He was off like a ruddy rocket!

SECOND REPORTER. What else would you expect? Come on!

Self starter. Roar of engine. Sound of fast driven car fading out. Fade in to subdued murmur of engine of Kent's car, noises indicative of traffic.

JOHN. Thank Heaven for that red light. They'll never catch us now.

EVELYN. No. And nobody will recognize you. You kicked up enough fuss when I gave all those very posh photographs of you to the papers--but now you're wearing a sweater and you need a shave and your hair is mussed. We have this day to ourselves.

JOHN. Yes. I say, this is a charming old pub. Very fitting name, too. The Rocket. But I suppose they mean the first railway engine. Not the first...

EVELYN. Don't say it. Don't talk about it. Just stop here, end we'll have a drink, and we'll listen to the locals talking, and it'll just be gossip about the sins of the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker...

Fade in to noise of stopping car of opening and closing door of friendly, companionable murmur of saloon bar. There could be background music, too obviously coming from loudspeaker, on the lines of BBC's "Music While You Work."

JOHN. One gin and Italian, please, and a pint of mild and stout.

Fade in to other conversations.

FIRST MAN. This tine termorrer them fellers'd sell their souls to be 'ere suppin' their beer wiv us.

SECOND MAN. You're right there, Ted. They must be fools, all of 'em, ter leave all this kind o' thing. 'Ere, Bert, is it right wot I 'ear? That you've sold 'em a gallon o' your special rum for fuel?

LANDLORD. If I had, an' if they were going to use it the right way, as fuel for their own bellies, they'd be alive and well this time tomorrow. Which is more than they will be. But ain't it a wicked waste? Good alcohol being used to drive one of them things!

FIRST MAR. What do you think, guv'ner?

JOHN. Oh, I don't know.

FIRST MAN. But wot good does it do? Answer me that! Wot good does it do?

JOHN (*sarcastically*). Oh, none at all. It only pushes back our frontiers a few hundred thousand miles. It's only the first rung of the ladder to the stars. It...

EVELYN (*urgently*), I've finished my drink, John. Let's go.

JOHN. I..

EVELYN (*a little viciously*). I want to go.

Noise of door opening and closing, of car outside starting, moving away.

FIRST MAN. Queer customer.

SECOND MAN. Yers. Talked like a toff, but didn't dress like one. One o' them in . . . intelligentiles, or whatever they calls 'em.

LANDLORD. Takin' it all quite serious, wasn't he? One of them blokes who'll tell you that they'd sell their souls to be going, and who'd back out like a frightened rabbit if they was given the chance.

FIRST MAN. I dunno. 'E might go.

SECOND MAN. Not 'im! 'Is wife'd never let 'im!

They all laugh. Fade out laughter and pub noises, fade in to background clamor suggestive of Hyde Park. A Salvation Army distant, supplies sweetly corny Moody and Sankey.

FIRST ORATOR. I tell you, friends, that this is flying in the face of the Almighty. There are some things that we were never meant to know, and this is one of them! Mark my words--there will be consequences. You all remember, don't you, the ruined harvests after the Bikini experiments? You remember...

Fade out. Fade in to--

SECOND ORATOR. But it cannot possibly work. The jet from the rocket must have something to push against. In airless space there is nothing, nothing, for it to push against...

JOHN. There is!

SECOND ORATOR. Perhaps this young man, who seems so remarkably well informed as to conditions outside the atmosphere, will condescend to explain just what is there to push against.

JOHN. Certainly. The forward wall of the combustion chamber. The fuel is exploded, you see, and the expanding gases rush free through the venturi, but also impinge upon the walls of the chamber. It's like the recoil of a gun. The bullets are the molecules rushing out through the jet, the jet itself is the gun muzzle. You must have a recoil. And the rocket recoils.

SECOND ORATOR. A gun recoils, young man, because the expanding gases are pushing against the shell en its way out, against the air itself. But there is no air in space...

HECKLER. How do you know there's not?

EVELYN (*whispering*). Don't be silly, John. Don't get into these absurd arguments. You know, *we* know...

JOHN. Yes. But it's so damned infuriating. It's all so obvious, and the fools can never see it. . . ,
Something to push against!

Fade in to--

THIRD ORATOR. And who is paying for this insanity? Why, you, sir. And you. And you. One would think that the Government could find better things on which to spend your money. Is there not cancer research? Is there not fen drainage? And what of the long promised hydro-electric development? But no. All these, to the visionaries that you have put into power, are matters of no consequence. You may remember that, this time two years ago, I warned you. I warned you that your money would be squandered on the wildest of wild goose chases. I warned you

Fade in to--

FOURTH ORATOR. No, friends, we ain't an imperialist nation. They tell us that, don't they? An' you believe it. *You* would. There ain't no British Empire any more--only what they call a Commonwealth of Nations, same as they called it in the days when it was an empire. But they have freed India. I grant you that--they have treed India. Because they had to. They can't get away with the old imperialistic tricks any longer down on this world. But this ain't the only world. Perhaps this ain't the only inhabited world. There may be people up there--on the Moon, on Venus an' Mars. They may be ripe for exploitation...

But that's not all. Here's another point. Suppose they get to the Moon, to the other side of the Moon that nobody has ever seen. Do you realize what it means? Of course you don't. But this is what it means: *Whoever holds the Moon holds Earth*. They can set up their rocket launching sites there, on the Other Side, where no one, not even with the best telescopes, can see them. They'll be able to bombard any city on Earth with impunity. An' it needn't be foreign cities. Oh, no. Just suppose that we all get really tired of this incompetent gang we've got in Parliament. . . . Just suppose that there are demonstrations, strikes, riots. Just suppose that the people seize, and hold, London. An' then, from a blue sky, come the V-2s. The first ones might be a warning, like, mightn't have no warheads. An' if *they* didn't work--well, you know what happened to Hiroshima...

Fade out. Fade in subdued noises of park. John and Evelyn are closer to the band. It is playing, and people are singing. "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder"

JOHN. Why do they hate us so? Why have they always hated us? All down the ages they have hated us. And there's always the old, old parrot cry--What good will it do? (Softly.) And what good will it do? All this is making me wonder. That last chap, for example. All that talk of his about cheap labor waiting to be exploited was so much rubbish. But not the rest of it. Whoever holds the Moon will hold the Earth... And the other powers won't like it. We may be ushering in an era of interplanetary war... Evelyn! Do you think... Do you think that I should...

EVELYN. No. You know that I hate you going. You know that I've never wanted you to go. But I should hate you if you backed out now. You're tired, John, that's all. We should have spent the day, as we planned, out in the country.

JOHN. We could get away now, for a few hours, But no. This is London. The country is not England. London is England...

EVELYN. And then...

Fade in the band again, the people singing, swell so that the trite melody assumes an air of momentous import-"When the roll is called up yonder I'll be there!" Fade out, fade in roar of traffic, snatches of music from restaurant orchestras, rattle of eating utensils, clink of glasses, montage of conversation.

MAN. Are you going out to see?

WOMAN. You bet. Bigger and better than any Brock's Benefit!

FIRST MAN (*from pub*). This time termorrer them fellers'd sell their souls to be 'ere...

FIRST ORATOR. This is flying in the face of the Almighty....

SECOND ORATOR. But what is it pushing against?

THIRD ORATOR. And who's paying for it?

FOURTH ORATOR. Imperialism! Imperialism!

A GRAVE VOICE (*with a touch of unidentifiable foreign accent*). Understand this--whoever holds the Moon, holds Earth....

A CHILD. But, Daddy, will they get there?

A FATHER. Of course not. 'Oever 'eard of anybody flyin' ter the Moon or the stars?

Fade in to rattling typewriter.

WRITER. We've dreamed about this for centuries. Wells and Verne, and all the queer, old johnnies before them with their vivid imaginations and no science, and all of us paper astronauts after them. And even when we've been reading about it, writing about it, we've never dreamed that it would come in our lifetime-not until Jerry launched the first spaceships and called them V-2s.... God! I wish that I could go!

The single typewriter is reinforced, becomes a battery, and a voice is heard calling--

VOICE. A Voyage to the Sun and the Moon... From the Earth to the Moon... The First Men in the Moon...A Columbus of Space.... Stowaway to Mars... Vanguard to Neptune... Far Centaurus...

WRITER. Yes. We were the first....

Fade back to John and Evelyn.

JOHN. Tine I was at the field.

Noise of car in a hurry, then squealing of brakes, protesting of tires. Then--

POLICEMAN. What's your hurry? I shall have to run you in.

JOHN. But I am in a hurry.

POLICEMAN, Are you a doctor?

EVELYN. No, officer. This is Mr. Kent.

POLICEMAN. Let's see. Sorry, sir, didn't recognize you at first. But do be careful, won't you? The roads are packed tonight--all of England's on its way out to the field. And--best of luck, sir. And to you, lady.

Fade in to noise of traffic, to the hooting of innumerable horns, to the shouts of irate drivers. Reduce in intensity so that it becomes background to dialogue.

WARREN. So you're here at last, Kent, Thought you wouldn't make it. Evening, Evelyn. There's a place for you on the stand with all the big-wigs.

JOHN. Sorry we're late, Warren. But the roads are literally jammed. We abandoned the car and walked the last stretch 'cross country.

WARREN. You should have come by 'copter. (*To himself.*) They should have insisted on having only single men in this show. You can't expect a man to spend his last day on Earth away from his wife.

JOHN. Well, Evelyn.

There is a silence, broken by Warren.

WARREN. Come on, Kent. The others are inside the ship, waiting for us. Officer! Will you take Mrs. Kent to the stand?

ANNOUNCER. And so, for the benefit of those of you without television receivers, I shall attempt to describe the scene. The sky is clear, and there is a waning, gibbous Moon high in the Eastern sky. The stars seem very close tonight. The field looks almost frosty in the glaring light of the big lamps. In the middle of the field is the ship. She could be a huge, silvery tower as she stands there, firm on the buttresses of her four big vanes. I can see somebody, with my binoculars, moving about in the "greenhouse" in the nose of the ship--the transparent cupola of the tower. That will be either Grant or Harris. Captain Warren and Kent--who was delayed in getting here--are just climbing the ladder up to the ship's airlock. This airlock, as you know, will enable them to come out in their spacesuits to explore the Moon's surface without losing any appreciable amount of air from inside the hull.

There are crowds all around the field. The whole country is black with them. The police are having trouble in keeping them back. There has already been minor rioting, caused by various fanatics who assert that the whole project is, in some obscure way, sinful. But the temper of the crowd is mainly good. And I am sure that the good wishes of all of us will be going out with those four brave men tonight.

The airlock door is closing. It is shut now. The hull is an unbroken surface of silvery metal. The police and the last few officials are walking, unhurriedly, away from the ship. Some of the people are singing, and there is a band playing, but I can't hear what it is for the roar of countless voices, the ceaseless clamor of motor oar horns,

Fade in to--

EVELYN (*to herself*). No, I wouldn't sit in the stand. I couldn't bear it--all the stuffed shirts with their talk about Empire and Conquest, all the old time-worn platitudes applied to something which is new and fresh and... and beautiful? I suppose it is, But John would want me down here, I think, among the people. He'd want me to hear what they said, so I can tell him if... No, no, I mustn't say that! So I can tell him when he comes back...

A WOMAN. What good will it do? What good will it do?

EVELYN. I beg your pardon?

WOMAN. What good will it do?

EVELYN. They asked Christopher Columbus that question.

ANOTHER WOMAN, Nasty things, them rockets, My old man was killed by a V-2.

A MAN. They've got guts. Say what you like--they've got guts.

ANOTHER MAN. Somebody had to be the first.

EVELYN (to herself). But not John! But not John!

A MAN (*with pompous solemnity*). If blood be the price of Admiralty...

AMPLIFIED VOICE. Fifteen seconds...

Fade in to the ticking of a clock. An unendurable pause, with dead silence. Then a screaming roar fading rapidly to a faint high whistling. Cries, screams, and shouts from the crowd. Fade in to--

ANNOUNCER. The grass of the field is burning, and the ship is only a streak of fire in the sky. Only a pathway of fading flame..., the road to the stars...

Fade in to crowd noises.

EVELYN. John! John, my...

A MAN. Stand back there, she's fainted.

ANOTHER MAN (*sourly*). She ain't the only one.

Silence. Then--

A VOICE (*It could be John's it could be the Writer's. Perhaps there is a distant roar of rocket drive, perhaps a phantom typewriter, perhaps both.*) We were the first.

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