THE LAST WORD

by

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The first word, I like to think, was "Ouch." Some cave man, trying to knock a stone into better shape with another stone, slipped, hit his thumb – and there you are. Language.

I have an affection for these useless and unverifiable facts. Take the first dog. He, I feel sure, was an unusually clever but cowardly wolf, who managed to terrorise early man into throwing him a scrap. Early man himself was a terrible coward. Man and wolf discovered that they could hunt together, in their cowardly fashion, and there you are again. 'Domesticated animals.'

I admit that I was lax during the first few thousand years. By the time I realised that Man needed closer supervision, many of the crucial events had already taken place. I was then a young – well, let us say a young fallen angel. Had I been older and more experienced, history would have turned out very differently.

There was that time when I happened across a young Egyptian and his wife sitting on a stone near the bank of theNile. They looked glum; the water was rising. A hungry jackal was not far away, and it crossed my mind that if I distracted the young people's attention for a few minutes, the jackal might surprise them.

"High enough for you?"I asked agreeably, pointing to the water.

They looked at me rather sharply. I had put on the appearance of a human being, as nearly as possible, but the illusion was no good without a large cloak, which was odd for the time of year.

The man said, "If it never got any higher, it would suit me."

"Why, I'm surprised to hear you say that," I replied. "If the river didn't rise, your fields wouldn't be so fertile – isn't that right?"

"True," said the man, "but also if it didn't rise, my fields would still be my fields." He showed me where the water was carrying away his fences. "Every year we argue over the boundaries, after the flood, and this year my neighbour has a cousin living with him. The cousin's a big, unnecessarily muscular man." Broodingly, he began to draw lines in the dirt with a long stick.

These lines made me a little nervous. The Sumerians, up north, had recently discovered the art of writing, and I was still suffering from the shock.

"Well, life is a struggle," I told the man soothingly. "Eat or be eaten. Let the strong win, and the weak go to the wall."

The man did not seem to be listening. "If there was some way," he said, staring at his marks, "that we could keep tally of the fences, and put them back exactly the way they were before –"

"Nonsense," I interrupted. "You're a wicked boy to suggest such a thing. What would your old dad say ? Whatever was good enough for him …"

All this time, the woman had not spoken. Now she took the long stick out of the man's hand and examined it curiously. "But why not?" she said, pointing to the lines in the dirt. The man had drawn an outline roughly like that of his fields, with the stone marking one corner.

It was at that moment that the jackal charged. He was gaunt and desperate, and his jaws were full of sharp yellow teeth.

With the stick she was holding, the woman hit him over the snout. The jackal ran away, howling piteously.

"Tut," I said, taken aback. "Life is struggle …"

The woman said a rude word, and the man came at me with a certain light in his eye, so I went away. And do you know, when I came back after the next flood, they were measuring off the fields with ropes and poles?

Cowardice again – that man did not want to argue about the boundaries with his neighbour's muscular cousin. Another lucky accident, and there you are. Geometry.

If only I had had the foresight to send a cave bear after the first man who showed that original, lamentable spark of curiosity … Well, it was no use wishing. Not even I could turn the clock back.

Oh, I gained a few points as time went on. Instead of trying to suppress the inventive habit, I learned to direct it along useful lines. I was instrumental in teaching the Chinese how to make gunpowder. (Seventy-five parts saltpetre, thirteen parts brimstone, twelve parts charcoal, if you're interested. But the grinding and mixing are terribly difficult; they never would have worked it out by themselves.) When they used it only for fireworks, I didn't give up; I introduced it again inEurope. Patience was my long suit. I never took offence. When Luther threw an inkwell at me, I was not discouraged. I persevered.

I did not worry about my occasional setbacks; it was my successes that threatened to overthrow me. After each of my wars, there was an impulse that drew men closer together. Little groups fought each other until they formed bigger groups; then the big groups fought each other until there was only one left.

I had played this game out over and over, with the Egyptians, the Persians, the Greeks, and, in the end, I had destroyed every one. But I knew the danger. When the last two groups spanned the world between them, the last war might end in universal peace, because there would be no one left to fight.

My final war would have to be fought with weapons so devastating, so unprecedentedly awful, that man would never recover from it.

It was.

On the fifth day, riding the gale, I could look down on a planet stripped of its forests, its fields, even its topsoil; there was nothing left but the bare, riven rock, cratered like the moon. The sky shed a sickly purple light, full of lightnings that flickered like serpents' tongues. Well, I had paid a heavy price, but Man was gone.

Not quite. There were only two left, a man and a woman. I found them alive and healthy, for the time being, on a crag that overhung the radioactive ocean. They were inside a transparent dome, or field of force, that kept out the contaminated air.

You see how near I had come to final defeat? If they had managed to distribute that machine widely before my war started … But this was the only one they had made. And there they were inside it, like two white mice in a cage.

They recognised me immediately. The woman was young and comely, as they go.

"This is quite an ingenious advice," I told them courteously.

In actuality, it was an ugly thing, all wires and tubes and so on, packed layers deep under the floor, with a big semi-circular control board and a lot of flashing lights. "It's a pity I didn't know about it earlier; we might have put it to some use."

"Not this one," said the man grimly. "This is a machine for peace. Just incidentally, it generates a field that will keep out an atomic explosion."

"Why do you say 'just incidentally'?" I asked him.

"It's only the way he talks," the woman said. "If you had held off another six months, we might have beaten you. But now I suppose you think you've won."

"Oh, indeed," I said. "That is, I will have, before long. Meanwhile, we might as well make ourselves comfortable."

They were standing in tense, aggressive attitudes in front of the control board, and took no notice of my suggestion. "Why do you say I 'think' I've won?" I asked.

"It's just the way I talk. Well, at least we gave you a long fight of it."

The man put in, "And now you're brave enough to show yourself." He had a truculent jaw. There had been a good many like him in the assault planes, on the first day of the war.

"Oh," I said, "I've been here all the time."

"From the very beginning?" the woman asked.

I bowed to her. "Almost," I said, to be strictly fair.

There was a little silence, one of those uncomfortable pauses that interrupts the best of talks. A tendril of glowing spray sprang up just outside. After a moment, the floor settled slightly.

The man and woman looked anxiously at their control board. The coloured lights were flashing. "Is that the accumulators?" I heard the woman ask in a strained, low voice.

"No," the man answered. "They're all right – still charging. Give them another minute."

The woman turned to me. I was glad of it, because there was something about their talk together that disturbed me. She said, "Why couldn't you let things alone? Heaven knows we weren't perfect, but we weren't that bad. You didn't have to make us do that to each other."

I smiled. The man said slowly, "Peace would have poisoned him. He would have shrivelled up like a dried apple." It was the truth, or near enough, and I did not contradict him. The floor lurched again.

"You're waiting to watch us suffer," the woman said. "Aren't you?"

I smiled.

"But that may take a long time. Even if we fall into the ocean, this globe will keep us alive. We might be in here for months before our food gives out."

"I can wait," I said pleasantly.

She turned to her husband. "Then we*must* be the last," she said. "Don't you see? If we weren't, would hebe here?"

"That's right," said the man, with a note in his voice that I did not like. He bent over the control board. "There's nothing more to keep us here. Ava, will you …" Hestepped back, indicating a large red-handled switch.

The woman stepped over and put her hand on it. "One moment," I said uneasily. "What are you doing? What is that thing?"

She smiled at me. "This isn't just a machine to generate a force field," she said.

"No?" I asked. "What else?"

"It's a time machine," the man said.

"We're going back," the woman whispered, "to the beginning."

Back, to the beginning, to start all over.

Without me.

The woman said, “You’ve won Armageddon, but you’ve lost Earth.”

I knew the answer to that, of course, but she was a woman and had the last word.

I gestured toward the purple darkness outside. “Lost Earth? What do you call this?”

She poised her hand on the switch.

“Hell,” she said.

And I have remembered her voice, through ten thousand lonely years.