

ONE MAN'S AMBITION

Bertrand Chandler

THE ROOM WAS quiet, save for the murmur of light music from the radio. The room was quiet with that quietness possible only when there are two people together. It was not the stillness of affectionate companionship, however; it was the deceptive serenity that should have as its background music the ticking of the time fuse, the sputtering of the slow match.

They were reading—she sitting in her armchair, he in his. He put his book down on his lap, filled and lit his pipe. She coughed as the cloud of acrid smoke reached her.

"Must you," she demanded, "smoke that foul thing?"

"I like it," he said.

"Other men," she complained, "smoke *good* tobacco."

"I smoke what I can afford," he told her.

"Cheapness!" she flared. "Cheapness! Cheapness! Ever since I was fool enough to marry you there's been nothing but cheapness! A cheap flat in a cheap town. Cheap food. Cheap drinks. Cheap clothes. A cheap car . . ."

"We cut our coat according to our cloth."

"Oh, if the cheapness were confined to material things I shouldn't mind so much. But you're such a cheap person in all ways. Your taste in films is cheap, your taste in music. And as for your taste in books. . ."

"*That's* not cheap," he said sullenly.

"Oh, isn't it? Cheap *and* adolescent, I'd say. Let me see." She got up from her chair, snatched the book from his lap. She read, scornfully, "*Rocket To Tomorrow*. And you say *that's* not cheap!"

"It's not. It's a very good anthology."

"Cheap escapism."

"It's not escapism. How many times must I tell you that good science fiction is not escapist—a thing that could never be said about the historical novels that you're so fond of."

"Not escapist, you say? Rockets to the moon, little green men from Mars, flying saucers . . ."

"Good science fiction," he said, "deals with problems that men and women will have to face someday. Someday soon, perhaps."

"All right," she said. "I'll take you up on that. You seem to be halfway through a story called *Judgment Eve*. What's it about?"

"You should read it," he said. "It's rather good."

"Read that trash! You tell me what it's about, that's all I want to know."

"All right. The author assumes that the sun is about to become a Nova—which means, of course, that Earth and all its inhabitants will be incinerated. The people have been told what is going to happen. The story tells how various men and women spend their last hours of life."

"*Very* helpful," she sneered. "I suppose that after reading it you'll be well equipped to face such an emergency. Now, just tell me what *you* would do if you learned that the world was going to come to an end tomorrow."

He refilled his pipe. Over the little flame of the match he glared at his wife.

"Let me have my book back," he said.

"Oh, no. Not until you've answered my question. What would *you* do?"

"It all depends. . . ." he muttered.

"It all depends on *what*? A typical, evasive answer. It all depends, I suppose, on whether or not you had the skill and the knowledge to build a spaceship to escape to Mars or Jupiter or wherever it is that people *do* escape to in these silly stories. (And did you have the nerve to say that they weren't escapist?) Come on, answer me."

"Given enough time," he said, "a ship could be built."

"But not by you."

"No."

"Then what would *you* do?"

"Give it a rest, will you?" he snarled.

"Why should I? You've often said that we have no conversation these days, and now that I've gone out of my way to cater to your juvenile interests you dry up."

"It's impossible to talk about anything," he said, "so long as you insist on making everything so damned personal. If we can't discuss a thing objectively we can't discuss it at all."

"And why not?"

"Because you make everything so damned personal. The next thing will be that you'll be telling me that at least three of the marvelous men you knew in the past could have built spaceships out of two oil drums and a kerosene heater and whisked you off to the Asteroid Belt with hours to spare."

"Perhaps they could, at that. But you haven't answered my question. What would *you* do?"

"I don't know."

He got up from his chair.

"Where are you going?"

"Into the kitchen to pour myself a beer. Do you mind?"

"You might ask me if *I* want one."

"Do you?"

"No."

He walked through into the kitchen. He got a glass out of the cupboard. He opened the refrigerator, took out a bottle of beer. He had the opener poised over the cap when he was startled by a loud, brief crackle from the radio.

"You might look at the set," called his wife. "It seems to have gone wrong."

"It can wait," he replied.

Then, instead of the music, there was a voice—frightened, speaking hastily, fading for seconds at a time.

"Emergency transmitter . . . intercontinental missiles . . . hydrogen . . . New York has been . . . London . . . Washington destroyed . . . Moscow . . . it is believed that . . . cobalt . . ."

"Did you hear?" she cried. "What does it mean?"

"It means," he said, putting down the bottle and going to a drawer, "the end of the world."

"What shall we do?"

He opened the drawer.

"What shall we do?" she called again.

He walked through into the living room, the carving knife gleaming in his hand.

"Reverting to your original question, my dear," he said, "here is the answer."