

## ULTIMATE CONSTRUCTION

The shifting sands moved over the face of the Earth and would soon engulf it.

For millennia now the oceans had been dry and the last tide had washed against the unending shore. The Earth was old. Its heart was cold, its skin dry  
**5** and wrinkled with encroaching dust. Like a living thing, the sands multiplied, wombed in the deserts where navies once sailed.

The death of moisture meant the death of man. A human being is not watertight: his vital juices evaporate like water from an unglazed pitcher. One by one, and then tribe by tribe and nation by nation, man disappeared as magically  
**10** as he had come. His bones were powdered by the moving grit, his mineral salts dissolved into the sand.

Yet for a long time he managed to postpone his final extinction. With every technological device at his command, he fought off the deserts in a losing battle that was not lost for centuries.

**15** Now the battle was almost over. The old pastures, the woodlands, the hills, even the regions of ice at either pole — all were covered by the sand. All the works of man, his cities, roads and bridges, were engulfed by the dunes. Every insect, bird and animal lay sleeping under that treacherous yellow blanket. Only in one last valley, in one last house, did one last spark of life survive.

**20** The Last Man on Earth came out of his door and stood regarding the scene. His valley was small and shallow, and completely ringed round the top with glass walls. This morning there was something new to see: the sand had arrived.

The sand pressed and surged against the glass like a living thing, tawnier and more terrible than lions. It rose and spread round the invisible obstacle. It

**25** could be heard whispering against the glass, trying to get in.

The glass cracked. Breaking under the pressure behind it, a whole section of it fell inward. At once a great arm of yellow sand reached into the valley and spread its fingers around the house. More followed, and more behind that, until a great wedge sliding in from the rear buried the back of the house up to its  
**30** eaves.

Without revealing any great emotion, the Last Man on Earth watched this invasion from the front garden. Over the lawn at his feet spread the tide, looking golden and soft and almost inviting. It seemed harmless; it was irresistible.

So little time now remained. There was one last thing the Last Man could  
**35** do. Turning, he ran through the sand that lay ankle-deep over the porch and hurried into the house to find a bucket and a spade.

A moment later he emerged triumphant. The Last Man on Earth was only six years old. He started to build a sandcastle.

*C. C. Shackleton*