

## THE LAST MOMENT

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CONNOLY, head and shoulders out of the cabin, was in time to see Svenson, the Swede, burst like a maniac from the group of men fighting like shadows in the mist of the forward pump. He caught faintly his yell of defiance as Flick, the second officer, ran out from among the shadows and intercepted him with a blow from a knotted fist that sent him reeling into the drowning wash of the sea. He shouted as the little gray man followed up Svenson's huge bulk, like a terrier, and other figures staggered out of the blinding spume, naked armed, bare chested, with Svenson's panic gleaming in their eyes. Flick saw him as he came across the deck and planted his back against the port davit, where the tops of the seas swept over him in smothering rushes.

"They've left the pumps!" he shouted as Connolly came up. "I'm damned—"

A ton of water breaking over the rail sent him reeling out among the men. He picked himself up and staggered to Connolly, his thin, gray-bearded face questioning him eagerly.

"She's a little better, boys!" shouted the captain. "But we can't take her out into that!"

He pointed out into the grayness of the sea, broken only by the foaming tops that rode rail-high with the ship.

"My God, men, no boat would live—"

The voice of a seaman rose almost in a shriek.

"We're full! We're full to a foot of the hatches, I tell y'! She's got to go now or never!"

There was sullen assent in a dozen water-blistered eyes. From early morning until noon these men had clung to a sinking ship because each cherished in

him a memory of the woman. Because of her they had fought until their hands bled and their breath came in gasps. They had watched the schooner settle inch by inch and foot by foot, struggling stubbornly for the precious minutes which would give life to her, until arms hung limp and effortless and men fell exhausted upon the deck when others took their turns at the pumps. And above them all Svenson had worked and urged and cursed those whose nerve began to fail them, until, when the last minute seemed riding on each white-crested rush of the sea, something broke within him, and he turned in his despair to the boats. It was Svenson now who rushed to the falls. In an instant Connolly was among the panic-stricken men.

"You can't live in that sea!" he shouted. "Fight it out another hour, men— one more hour!" The black cook had drawn a knife to cut the davit ropes, and Connolly dragged him back by the throat.

"You will stay!" he shrieked, with an oath. From behind him he heard Svenson's loud call for help, and as he stumbled to the deck with the cook he saw that the Swede had slipped his end of the falls and was straining at the ropes to keep the boat from being rammed by the heads of the seas. Even as he freed himself of the negro, a huge sweep of water shot up like a geyser from the schooner's side, hurling the bow of the small boat to the deck and hitting Svenson a blow that sent him half amidships. The tackle had slipped from its block, leaving the ropes and davit useless, and, commanded by the voice of the crazed Swede, the demoralized crew rushed across to the starboard boat. Connolly

had missed Flick, and now the little old mate came running from the cabin with a revolver in his hand. The captain went between him and the men.

"Let 'em go, Flick!" he cried. "They're leaving the other boat. Let 'em go. They're mad!"

Slowly Flick backed to the port side, his pistol cocked, watching the men to starboard like a cat. For a few moments he stood there, his weather-whitened eyes never for an instant off the thrilling scene before him; then he turned to the abandoned boat, and as he leaned over to begin the readjustment of the tackle a cry as filled with madness as that of Svenson's fell from his lips. He whirled about with his revolver on a dead level, but was a moment too late. As the report of the shot sounded faintly above the thunder of the sea the starboard boat, filled with half-mad men, slipped down into the gray mist, and when Flick reached the empty falls he could only blaze away at a pitching shadow that was losing itself in the gloom. Connolly caught him by the arm, and, like one dazed by a sudden blow, Flick slowly faced him.

"Jim, she's—*stove in!*"

There was a terror in his eyes that Connolly could not fail to understand. He knew that the little man was thinking of what was down in the cabin. Speechless, the two returned to the port davits and stood over the ruined boat. From it Connolly turned his eyes to the gray desolation that shut in the sinking ship. The schooner rode more easily now. She had settled until the resistance she gave to the sea was as solid as that of a mass of steel, and the ramming of her sides only sent jarring throes through her timbers, as though a thousand-ton weight touched her gently each time she was struck. A few minutes more, a sudden sweep of water over the rail, and Connolly knew that she would go down, quietly and without sensation, but with merciful quickness. He turned toward

the cabin, and at the threshold of the door that led to where the woman lay he paused for an instant and fought for the strength that he knew he would need. Then he opened it and entered. At the end of the room a woman lay upon a cot, her strangely white face turned expectantly toward the door. As Connolly came through she smiled, and her beautiful eyes brightened with a glad light.

"It has seemed so long, Jim," she said, her voice rising barely above a whisper. "The storm frightens me. But it's quieter now, isn't it?"

"Yes, dear!"

The man took off his dripping hat and coat and sat down beside her. The woman, as he did so, drew down the coverlet a few inches so that he might see the little pink face lying against her bosom. He leaned over, more to hide his own whiteness than to caress, and stroked the baby's cheek with a big forefinger. The woman took his other hand and pressed it happily. She spoke no word, but when the man raised himself to look into her face he saw the great dawn of the new life shining adoringly in her eyes. The gentle happiness there seemed to creep up and embrace him, like a thousand clinging arms, and with his heart almost breaking in its agony he pressed his lips close down against her own and for many minutes lay quietly, listening to the bursting crashes of the sea and counting the time when the last moment of them all would come. After a time the woman said:

"Jim!"

"Yes, dear."

"Are you—*very* glad?"

The man pressed her face to him with passionate tenderness. He did not answer in words, but the woman was satisfied. Then he gently drew himself away, the young wife's eyes following him inquiringly.

"You're not going back—now?" she asked. "I thought—"

"Yes—Flick is in charge," he said

quickly. "But I must see—that everything's all right—" Between his words he hesitated, listening to a sound under his feet that thrilled him. It was like the bumping of floating cargo against the deck. The water was rising faster than he supposed, but he showed no sign of the fear that was in him.

"You will be back soon?"

"Right away, Jen!"

He came back to kiss her, the sickening throbbing at his heart almost suffocating him as he looked down into the woman's confident eyes, luminous with a touch of the old fever. He was glad that she did not know. It would make the end easier for him—and for her, if the end had to come. And he knew there was only one chance in ten thousand against it. As he passed out of the cabin he saw the life belts strung along the ceiling. For an instant it flashed into his mind that he might use them. As quickly the thought passed from him. They would only prolong their misery a little longer, and the woman—he shuddered as he pictured what those few minutes of life battling in the sea would mean for her. The end would come easier in the cabin. In the last minute she would understand, and would love him more for it. So he passed out, closing the door carefully behind him, and scanned the deck for Flick.

In the mist which enshrouded the abandoned pump, belched up in clouds over the bow, he saw him fighting feebly where Svenson and the crew had been half an hour before. It struck Connoly that there was a touch of the Swede's madness in him now, for only madness could keep him there, with his arms steadily rising and falling as if the rhythm of the pump count was still sounding in his ears. He had come out to shake hands with Flick and pass a last word with him, because Flick had stood by him and the woman. But something held him from interrupting the man at the pump. It occurred to him that the

mate had lost count of material things, and that his madness was a blessing. He might have had a chance in a hundred or two by packing himself with life belts, but that chance was hardly worth fighting for. Connoly would scarcely have taken it himself had he been alone.

For a few moments he listened for the sound under his feet. But he heard and felt only the jarring of the ship which came of the seas pounding against her. With his eyes on Flick he went to the midship hatch and thrust an arm through the hole that had been made for a pump. He did not expect to touch water. The fact that he did brought him to his feet as though something had bitten him. Flick had seen him, and stood huddled just out of the sheets of spray that shot over the bow, watching as if the sight of the man rising from his knees was curious and interesting. Connoly beckoned to him. Flick's only response was to dive back into the mist, like an animal hunting cover, and then again Connoly saw him, shadow-like, bending and rising with the motion of the pump.

A great shudder ran through the schooner. If she had possessed a tight hold Connoly would have thought that she had struck a rock. The leeward drift that had won these last hours of existence for her against the rushes of the sea seemed suddenly stopped, as if she had steadied herself for the final engulfment. Connoly turned and ran for the cabin. He heard Flick's cry behind him and caught a glimpse of the little man as he staggered out of the mess forward. But it was too late to stop, even to give a last word to Flick. Over his shoulder he saw the starboard rail hidden in a mass of seething water, and as he reached the door it swished about him ankle deep and followed him in a torrent into the cabin. Again he heard that cry of Flick's, but he shut the door, as he had planned, and bolted it to give himself a few last moments of life with the woman.

When he turned to her with the tragedy that had overtaken them written in his face, his outstretched arms dropped slowly to his side. Only her name fell from his lips. The words that he had meant to say were left unspoken. The woman was asleep. Her face was toward him, and in the dim lamp glow he saw deepening in her cheeks the flush of returning fever. One white hand had fallen over the side of the cot, and on it gleamed their wedding ring. Like an animal Connoly fell upon his knees. The water trickled about his fingers as he crept to her. At the bedside he stretched an arm over her; so gently that she did not awaken. Then he turned his face to the door, grim with the terror of this last moment, but filled with the splendid sanity of his resolve. The sea would not get the best of him. He would have the woman, at the last—and so firmly that the hell of a thousand seas could not separate them. But it would not be until the last—the very last. Then she would awaken only to know that he was there, and would die before the misery and the terror of it all came to her. The man fancied that he heard the beating of water against the panels; his staring eyes saw it pouring faster under the door—he heard it straining against the cabin walls. The floor seemed lifting him up. Bow first, the schooner was diving to her doom. His arm grew heavier over the woman. His other slipped under her head. Then came another shock, longer than the one that had preceded it, and after that there was absolute quiet, save for the trickling of water under the door and the tremendous beating of his own heart.

Still the woman slept.

There came a knock from outside, again and again, and then a sudden pressure that burst off the bolt, and Flick stood there, babbling words that seemed to have no meaning. He went as suddenly as he came, and Connoly could hear his sobbing voice dying away on deck. He drew his arms from the woman and followed. At the door he paused for a moment, then slipped out.

The woman's fever-stricken face moved a little. Her eyelids trembled, and after a moment she opened them.

"Jim!" she called weakly.

A gust of wind slammed the door.

"Jim, where are you?"

She drew herself up on an elbow, frightened, and saw the water running black and ugly on the floor.

"Jim—Jim—Jim—"

A man sprang through the door. It was Connoly. He wrapped her close to his wet breast, and the laugh that fell from his lips was filled with an insane joy. Over his shoulder, standing in the doorway, the woman saw Flick.

"Had quite a time of it, but it's all over now, sweetheart!" whispered Connoly. "Where do you think the old tub is? Couldn't guess, eh? Well, she's settled as soundly as the Rock of Ages somewhere on the Thunder Bay shore! Tried to fight her off, but we couldn't do it. Now all we've got to do is to eat and sleep until somebody comes to pull us off. Eh, Flick?"

Flick had gone. Out on deck, with his face turned to the indistinct outline of the shore, and the gleams of sunlight bursting through the ragged clouds, he bowed his gray head and softly whispered what little he could remember of the Lord's Prayer.

