

## The Final Words of John Steadiman

There was a crushing sense of sadness upon me as soon as my eyes were open that morning, although I did immediately wonder whether I had not in fact been fighting that feeling for quite some time.

I thought at first a child had been playing near, such was the lovely sound of laughter which seemed to drift down from above, but waking into the emptiness and quietness of that room I realised quick that there was no such thing and my own eyes answered such a disappointment with a few quiet tears.

Instead I was met, as each morning, by the lapping of waves which ran from the great river beneath and the hurried shouts of men loading up the ships for foreign passage. It was often a comforting sound to an old sailor such as I for whom the world had always been a peculiarly watery one, and for whom the rich crystal light which played on the bare walls in small and rippling puddles had become the reflections only of the past and no longer of the present. But this morning the sights and sounds were of no comfort and instead I could concentrate on little more than the pain which worked through the body like slow fire, ending abrupt at the rough tips of my withered hands and, of course, that sadness.

To add, there was a coldness in the room from the open window which gathered itself around my skin as tight as rope and pulled each time a draught billowed in. I had been many times colder in my life, of course, but the body forgets easily the extent of a past chill and reacts only to that temperature which is before it and on it. I could not help but shiver, but foremost still was the feeling I had been brought awake with.

I knew not what it was which had delivered this disquiet, though I was quite sure it had come from some deep recess within me, drifting out that hatch which oft stays open when sleep has been done with for the night. Under its weight I found that I could not move. Looking over to the open window but paralysed at the idea of finding myself there, I discovered instead that the source of my thoughts had been possessed by a most inquisitive agent.

‘Are you ready today John?’ I seemed to ask, and I found myself fully dumb to the question. Ready for what exactly?

Quick as a gale another query blew in and this time it seemed made of a simpler substance. ‘Do you know where you are today?’ I asked aloud to the room, but I did not attempt to answer immediately. Of course I knew. And yet a certain form of depthless quiet seemed to swallow the information right there before me, stealing it from the edge of my tongue. Inly, I begged of myself a quick resolution and yet this only blew in further questions, such as what bed exactly this was that I was in and what had caused the pain which stretched through my body. These questions beckoned answers which sailed clearly towards me, only to again sink into blankness. Well then, perhaps I did not know. And yet how could I not?

At that moment came a brash knocking at the door and without so much as a moment to answer, a clattering came through it of Miss Featherlight, my housekeeper, with a tray of breakfast steaming beneath her nose.

‘You are awake I see Mr Steadiman sir,’ she said, as though my sleep could have survived her unrestrained introduction to the room. ‘Well, that is a fortunate thing for I have brought you a breakfast designed to temper your sickness, so I have sir.’

Had I a sickness upon me? A new question which brought no answer! But were there not now answers drifting in from those earlier questions? Certainly there were. I was at my home at Gravesend, in the same bed I had used for the past ten years, and I was in pain because my body had become as old as a rotten clipper ready for breaking. Still though, I could not summon the knowledge of a sickness and, even with some strain, was fully let down by my cognitive impotence. The further I attempted to look back, the less could I grasp anything tangible, until only a certain feeling remained. It was again that crushing sense of sadness which had been upon me the moment I had woken. Had I felt this way before? Did Miss Featherlight know of it? Had she mistaken this feeling for a sickness? Before I had the chance to ask, as if reading my silence, Miss Featherlight came again: ‘You are very unwell and have been for some time now sir, you do not always remember these things so well.’

I did not feel compelled to ask of my ailment and so startled was I by my own confusion that I bade my housekeeper leave the breakfast by my side and permit me to sleep some more. She did as I requested, only moaning some indecipherable chapter as she left.

There was a cloudiness about me as I again closed my eyes and listened to the sounds of the men out on the loading docks, and, although I was sure to be mistaken, I thought I had once more caught the sounds of a child's laughter drifting down from above, and tears leaked onto the pillow as I began to fall back into sleep.

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I woke in a hurry with the confused thought that Miss Featherlight was introducing a visitor, and lo, there in the room was Captain Ravender sat before me, drooping in sleep, and though age had loosened his pale skin so it hung like draped sails from his face and though it had deepened his eyes so they appeared all the world as empty barrels, there was no mistaking that friendly and stately man who had ruled with such benign grace over the many watery lanes of the world, oft with me proud by his side.

A huge smile came from him as he recovered from his spell of drowsiness to look upon my own open eyes, and that smile fell like a kind patch of sunlight from between two plates of ocean mist.

'Captain Ravender,' said I, and shuffled as quickly as I could from the bed to fully embrace him.

'John, after all these years it is a joy to see you again,' said he with an excitable air. He moved in the chair with difficulty, displaying the distortion which age puts upon the muscles and bones of each sailor who has worked forever on the great temper of the seas as though it were there only for it to be tamed.

‘My housekeeper tells me I have a sickness. I fear it may be of the worst kind,’ said I, seating myself beside him and pouring a glass of rum for us both.

Captain Ravender took this information in with a slow nod.

‘I am afraid you have only a short distance left to row John,’ said he, and his steady voice caused a wave of terror to wash over me. It was so terrifically sad to see him again! I loved him just as much as any brother, yet side by side we had watched that remarkable ship, the Golden Mary, sink into the dark of the icy sea, and more than thirty years since, I still feared to ask him whether the blame was mine or not. I realised now that I was not ready to die while still tied by that question.

‘You oft think of the Golden Mary?’ he enquired, as though he were a most intelligent fish, swimming between my memories of that terrible wreck. Still I could see before me that very blackness which turned the world to a formless hole down which we fell in every direction, and still I could hear the thud and scrape of merciless ice on wood.

‘It was on my watch sir,’ I said.

Captain Ravender placed a soft hand on mine.

‘It would have happened to me just the same had I not been asleep. And aft, you rowed for thirty days across those violent seas to save scores of people John, including me. No blame is upon you nor ever has been.’

I looked up at my former commander and I could feel that my face was rapt with the pressure that was inside me. ‘But I did not save the child!’ said I, and on speaking this to the captain, the crushing feeling of sadness attacked my ribs and squeezed even tighter. With that, I emitted a terrific sobbing sound and moments later Miss Featherlight had entered my room to see what cacophony it was that I was making.

‘Oh Mr Steadiman sir,’ said she in quite a fluster. ‘What are you doing up from the bed?’

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Days and nights seemed to rise and fall and never was I of the sensible kind for more than a few moments within any of them. So much so, that when I woke next in possession of some manner of wits, it may have been some days or even weeks later.

The room was muddy with the gloom of evening and outside I could hear the fine crepitation of rain falling on the great river. It was an oddly familiar sound, that rain, and brought with it again a swift sadness, which contained in it the sad query as to whether I was indeed nearing the end.

Certainly something was happening within me for, in waves, I would feel my weak legs begin to shake beneath the covers and my heart start to tremble like the last flaps of a fish on dry land. And then, moments later, I would fall quite silent, completely taken by the blackest misery which man should ever wish to avoid and my heart would feel as though it had stopped altogether, before the shaking in my legs would start up once again.

Thoughts came on then in those ghastly moments like a sudden storm at the prow. I did not save the child, no, I did not. That golden haired angel we called the Golden Lucy, no I did not save her. So full of life at but three years, and it was the wreck of the Golden Mary, my wreck, that killed her; she had tossed for weeks in a small boat out against the cold and the thirst and the hunger and no child could be expected to survive that. She wasted away to nearly nothing, until the captain found her poor body a grave at the bottom of the sea. No one issued a word of blame for me; no, no one. No one but me. But I could not escape my own blame, and I was not ready to go before I escaped that. Yet, how could I escape it? Who else was I set to leave this world with but myself?

I can only report the further misfortunes of those quivering minutes for nothing of good came, simply more thoughts such as these. Not a sound more appeared than that dashing spread of rain outside, and I, near to tears, was left most dispirited and certain, then, with this black weight now fully over me,

that I was indeed facing death and that I would be ushered towards the breach with guilt tied as heavy as stones to my drowning body.

From the quiet, voices approached outside my door; the muffled tones of Miss Featherlight conversing with another lady if I was not to be mistaken. As they got closer I was able to catch the tail-end of the lady's speech and it was with apparent courtesy and friendliness that she was saying: '... Oh but if it is not so much trouble to go to. I was so desperate to see him a final time.' And the reply from my housekeeper came: 'It is fine so long as you can bear it. I am afraid he will not see out much longer. And while he is awake, he is sometimes with us, oft away. It comes and goes, so it does.' As the door opened, the woman continued, now in a hushed and pensive tone, very much to herself as to anybody else: 'Much like the tides of the sea.'

A golden light! Well now, was this not a sign of the end? Certainly my heart grew lively and nearly leapt clean into my throat at the sight of that golden glow coming closer towards me.

'Mr Steadiman,' came a warm and charitable whisper. 'Mr Steadiman, are you asleep?'

I was not, but nor was I capable of offering an answer, so taken was I with that golden light. I stared back into it, lost at that moment in its glow and the meaning it surely held. Unspoken words were now forming a film of saliva about the flat of my tongue which, as I rolled it about my mouth, tasted all the world like brine.

'Oh Lord, he is wide awake,' said Miss Featherlight and pulled back the light quick, placing it on a chest beside the bed. Now the words came out: 'The Golden Luh...!' I said, though my mouth would not finish what it was so busy to say.

'It is nothing but a candle Mr Steadiman,' said the lady, and I could feel a dainty hand running gentle over my forehead. But words were attempting to escape from me as one may feel the wretched convulsions of nausea. 'The Golden Luh, The Golden Luh...' I went on.

'Mr Steadiman,' said the lady, 'it is I, Frances Atherfield.'

‘The Golden Luh, The Golden Luh...’ I continued, and even louder, desperate to be rid of the words which would catch in my throat each time I tried to pronounce them. I must admit I took little notice of the poor lady, so keen was I to finish what the whole of my being was so miserably attempting to expel.

She raised her sweet voice so that it sat above mine. ‘Do you remember me sir? I was on the Golden Mary with you and Captain Ravender. I believe we spoke again at Captain Ravender’s funeral, two years ago.’

His funeral? But he had just visited?

I fell silent for seconds, but then the words were back upon me. ‘The Golden Luh...The Golden Luh... The Golden Luh...’ I shouted on and on, apparently causing quite a scene, for the lady now turned to my housekeeper and began to cry.

‘Oh Miss Featherlight,’ she said. ‘I know exactly what it is he is trying to say. It was my daughter we lost in the wreck. He called her the Golden Lucy. He was so terribly fond of her.’

Miss Featherlight replied: ‘But madam he never spoke a word of her, or any wreck, so private is he of the past.’

‘But,’ said Mrs Atherfield in some degree of shock. ‘He saved so many lives.’

And at that moment, right there before me, I saw a child run into the room; a shining, golden, beautiful girl.

‘The Golden Lucy!’ I suddenly exclaimed and I freely admit that I felt the relief of her appearance as keenly as if the Lord Almighty himself had been standing there before me.

The girl danced and laughed and played around the end parts of my bed, turning from time to time to offer me a smile of such love that the tears would not come fast enough to my eyes.

Mrs Atherfield was crying too, but there was something of warmth in her cry and she picked up the girl and brought her towards me. ‘This is Lucy,’ said she, smiling down at me all the time. ‘I had asked her to wait outside, had I not young lady?’

‘The Golden Lucy!’ I again called out and held out my arms to her. Mrs Atherfield placed the girl carefully in my arms, and Lucy nestled her little head into my chest, emitting a beautiful little laugh as she did so. Oh, what a wonderful child!

‘She is my granddaughter,’ said Mrs Atherfield, now composing herself again. ‘She, and no doubt many others born since, have their lives to thank you for. She would not be here without you Mr Steadiman.’

I know not what happened immediately after this for my eyes were so filled with tears that I wondered if I had been blinded by salt water. I heard only broken words and conversations between Mrs Atherfield and Miss Featherlight, and eventually the small steps of Mrs Atherfield and Lucy leaving the room.

It is true to add though that by then I had already closed my eyes and the world was as black as any night at the Cape Horn. Indeed, it felt as though the whole of me was sinking slowly into a dark watery exhaustion and only my mouth kept on kicking. Mere utterances were now all I could produce, though they were happy ones: ‘The Golden Lucy... The Golden Lucy... The Golden Lucy...’ over and over, til I was quite worn out.

In that pool of darkness, the child’s laughter seemed to fall upon me again, beautiful and clean and happy, and I felt certain that the crushing feeling which had been there for so long had been lifted from me, and it was quite as though a ship at the bottom of the ocean had floated back up to the surface and was free now to continue sailing, off towards the horizon.

‘Do try to sleep John,’ came the calm voice of Captain Ravender.

‘Now I am ready,’ said I, and outside the rain went on.