

Last Match

BY PAUL MASON



CHARACTERS

WILLIAM SANGUILY (ordinary seaman) | JAMES TEER (passenger)
JOSEPH JEWELL (able seaman) | BARTHOLOMEW BROWN (first mate)
MARY ANN JEWELL (Joseph's wife) | OTHER SURVIVORS

Scene: *The Auckland Islands, 1866. The survivors of a shipwreck are heaving their boat from the water.*

WILLIAM SANGUILY (*speaking to the audience*).

The *General Grant* is lost. Twenty-five fathoms deep. As we escaped from the wreck, I saw Captain Loughlin, clinging to the mizzen-topmast, waving farewell as his ship went down. Standing at his post to the last.

JAMES TEER (*speaking to the audience*). We rowed against the waves and the wind and met nothing but sheer cliffs. We stuck to our oars, fighting the cold and our misfortune, until at last, on the afternoon of the third day, we found a safe place to land ...

WILLIAM SANGUILY and JAMES TEER *rejoin the others.*

JOSEPH JEWELL. Heave!

WILLIAM SANGUILY. Heave!

JAMES TEER. And again!

With the last of their strength, the castaways pull the boat to shore. They collapse, exhausted, onto the beach.

JOSEPH JEWELL. So cold. Fire. We must have fire. (*He pats his pockets, then calls out to the others.*) Do any of you have a match or flint? Mr Brown, sir?

BARTHOLOMEW BROWN *says nothing.*

JOSEPH JEWELL *gives his shoulder a shake.*

JOSEPH JEWELL. A match, Mr Brown?

BARTHOLOMEW BROWN (*staring into space*).

She cried out to me.

JOSEPH JEWELL. A match, Mr Brown?

BARTHOLOMEW BROWN (*hanging his head*). My wife. Nora.

The other castaways frantically search their clothes.

MARY ANN JEWELL (*looking around the beach*). Were there really so few of us to survive?

JOSEPH JEWELL. And precious little provisions. (*He raises his voice against the wind.*) We must have fire.

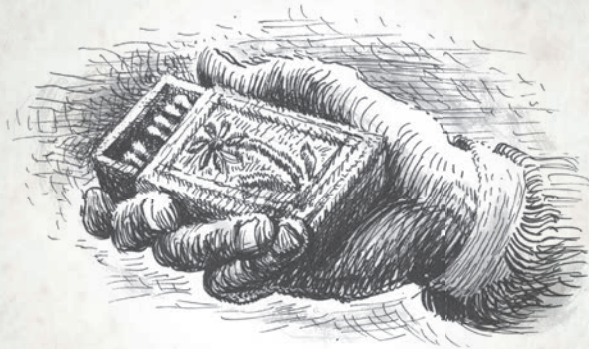
JAMES TEER (*raising a shaking hand from his pocket, his frozen fingers like a claw*). Matches!

The others gather around him.

WILLIAM SANGUILY. Many?

JAMES TEER (*opening the box, hands trembling*). Six. There are six!

MARY ANN JEWELL. Thank heavens. We stand a chance.



JAMES TEER *collects a few pieces of nearby wood, places them together, and strikes the first match. It sparks and catches alight. The castaways' eyes light up, too. JAMES TEER carefully cups the match in his hands. But without any kindling, it quickly goes out.*

JAMES TEER. I'm a fool. We need dry twigs. Quickly!

Some of the castaways spread out to look for twigs. Others remain, collapsed and shivering on the beach.

WILLIAM SANGUILY (*speaking to the audience*). The *General Grant* lay berthed eight weeks in Melbourne, loading cargo before we sailed. Mostly wool and hides – and two boxes filled with gold. Many in steerage were goldminers, returning with their finds, but there were families below decks, too. Among them, the Lansons, farmers from France, if I recall, with four children. And Mrs Oat with her four little ones. Eighty-three of us on board all told.

WILLIAM SANGUILY *joins the other castaways, who begin to add their twigs to the fire.*

JAMES TEER. Gather round. We need to shield it from the wind.

With shaking hands, JAMES TEER takes out another match. The castaways watch his every move. He strikes, but the match fails to light. He shakes his head and throws it away. With great care, his movements slow and measured, he strikes another. The castaways hang their heads when it, too, fails.

JAMES TEER *strikes a fourth match.*

JAMES TEER. Light will you!

There are groans from the castaways as the match goes out.

JAMES TEER (*shaking his head*). The fates are against us. Surely they cannot be so cruel!

JOSEPH JEWELL (*speaking to the audience*). We sailed on the fourth day of May, 1866, waving goodbye to Port Phillip, bound for London. All went well until the early hours of the fourteenth. Just past midnight, in darkness, and at the mercy of a heavy swell, we struck rocks ...

JAMES TEER (*speaking to the audience*). Those fatal rocks! The jib boom struck and sheared off. The vessel shot astern into another rocky point. Then we lost our rudder, throwing the man at the wheel and breaking his ribs. The seas forced our head into a cavern. Further and further into that cave we went.

JOSEPH JEWELL. Walls towered over us. It was so dark you could not see your fingers before your eyes. The ship crashed and shuddered against the unforgiving rock.

JAMES TEER. The foremast struck the roof, taking the main topmast with it. Spars crashed to the deck. Large stones fell, shattering timber. We fled below.

JOSEPH JEWELL. What followed was such a night of horror as I think never experienced by human beings. We bumped and juddered again and again. More stones crashed onto the deck. We were afraid the vessel would sink before morning, and if she had, there would not be anyone left to tell our sorry tale.

JOSEPH JEWELL and **JAMES TEER** rejoin the others. **JAMES TEER** strikes another match. It goes out. The castaways watch as the useless match drops to the ground.

WILLIAM SANGUILY (*sobbing*). That's five. Five matches gone!
What will we do?

BARTHOLOMEW BROWN. We are doomed!

MARY ANN JEWELL. We need to calm ourselves.

JAMES TEER. I need to think.

The castaways freeze.



BARTHOLOMEW BROWN (*speaking to the audience*). With daylight, the captain gave the order for the boats to be readied. The first boat set off to find a safe landing – it was all the men on the oars could do to keep it off the rocks. Another was lowered to carry the women and children. Captain ordered me on board to take charge.

MARY ANN JEWELL (*speaking to the audience*). I slid down the rope and dropped into the icy water. I reached for the side of the boat. Mr Teer tried to help. Then I felt arms around me. It was Joseph. He pushed me on board. By then, the sea poured over the *General Grant*. The cave filled with the shrieks of those on deck. But we could not rescue them, our boat was half-full of water and in danger of sinking herself.

BARTHOLOMEW BROWN (*sobbing*). Nora.

BARTHOLOMEW BROWN and **MARY ANN JEWELL** rejoin the others. *The castaways stare at JAMES TEER in a hush. Some hold their heads in their hands.*

JAMES TEER. The last match.

MARY ANN JEWELL. Our last chance.

WILLIAM SANGUILY. If it fails?

JOSEPH JEWELL. It won't fail.

WILLIAM SANGUILY (*hysterical*). But if it does, we're done for.
The cold! We'll perish.

BARTHOLOMEW BROWN (*suddenly becoming alert and grabbing for the box*). Let me.

JAMES TEER (*shoving him off*). Away with you.

MARY ANN JEWELL. Gentlemen, please! This gets us nowhere!

BARTHOLOMEW BROWN and **JAMES TEER** stop tussling but still glare at each other.

JAMES TEER. One last match.

JOSEPH JEWELL. Make sure it is well and dry.

JAMES TEER. Aye.

JAMES TEER finds a dry place on his clothes and slowly, carefully rubs the match. He closes his eyes for a moment and steadies himself. **WILLIAM SANGUILY** gets up and leaves the others. He holds his head in his hands, unable to watch. **JAMES TEER** strikes the match. His eyes widen as it catches. Then, gently, he puts it on the kindling. The others watch, holding their breath. Slowly, their faces brighten. As the flames begin to grow, they reach out with grateful hands. **WILLIAM SANGUILY** turns around and sees the smoke. He stumbles over.

JOSEPH JEWELL. And from that one match ...

WILLIAM SANGUILY. Nursed with the most desperate care ...

JAMES TEER. We obtained a fire, which we kept alive every day of the long months we were on those isles.

MARY ANN JEWELL. So few of us made these shores. The others, sixty-eight persons, lost their lives, fourteenth of May, 1866, by wreck of the ship *General Grant* on Auckland Isles.



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The *General Grant* was sailing from Melbourne to London when it struck trouble in the subantarctic Auckland Islands. Eighty-three people were on board, but only fifteen made it ashore. To survive, they grew potatoes and caught wild pigs. After nine months, four men set out in a boat, bound for Bluff, almost 500 kilometres away. They were never seen again.

Rescue finally came for the remaining castaways in the shape of the *Amherst*. They had survived eighteen long months in the harshest conditions imaginable. At their suggestion, the *Amherst*'s captain left behind a tin trunk filled with the tools needed for survival in case other poor souls found themselves marooned. Included was a box of matches. The castaways also left behind memorials carved on slate for the passengers lost.

This play is based on the actual accounts of the survivors. The names are real, and some of the lines are their own. The castaways really did believe that their lives hung in the balance the moment they struck the last remaining match.

It didn't take long for treasure hunters to begin searching for the *General Grant*'s gold, but it was never found. Legends of the lost treasure persist to this day.

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by Paul Mason

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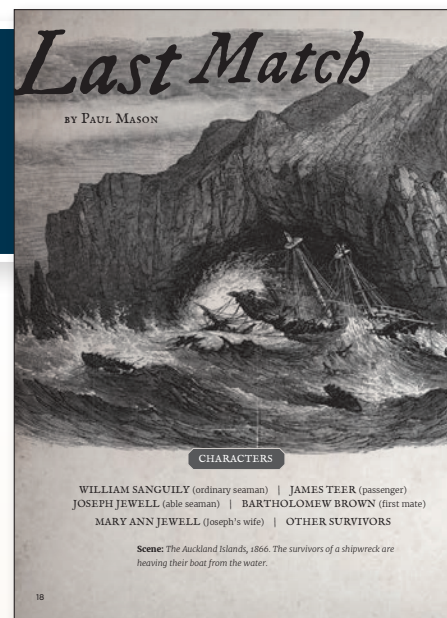
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