

- William Sansom

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"The Vertical Ladder" is a remarkable

short story by William Sansom. Sansom holds a significant place in the hierarchy of modern short story writers. His stories are interspersed with the new awareness of the lights and shadows within the human mind which has been generated by modern psychology and by the nervous intensity of contemporary life. In the present story, Sansom gives us a nerve-breaking account of the horrifying experiences of a young boy, Flegg who risks his life for the sake of love.

The story opens on a strong spring day, abruptly as warm as midsummer. Apparently taking a moment off the humdrum, suffocating existence, Flegg along with the two boys and two girls reaches near a gasometer and they all started throwing bricks against the rusted sides of the gasometer. In a bid to enlist the admiration of one of the two girls - dark haired and blackeyed, Flegg throws his bricks higher than all other. At this the girl challenges him. "Bet you can't climb as high as I can throw." It was a tough, dangerous, almost impossible challenge to accept. But Flegg does not want to disappoint the girl. So, he decides to climb the gasometer by the vertical ladder, which was rusted and some twenty feet of its lower rungs had been torn away. His beloved girl gives him a handkerchief. He

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took the handkerchief, blew the girl a dramatic kiss, --- ran.

And thus the climb starts. Flegg undergoes all these traumatic experiences which a new climber has to face. He reaches the ladder head and the first of the "perpendicular iron rungs" in one go. He rests there for sometime.

As he places his hands on the iron support, the rust powders off and sneaks him with its red dust and then and large scrap flakes off and falls into his face as he looks upward. His hands firmly gripping the iron, he shakes off the rust flake with a jerk of his head and begins to climb again. He climbs ^{ten} rungs of the iron ladder when his hands first begin to feel moist.

When suddenly, as though catastrophe had overtaken him not gradually but in one overpowering second, he realised that he was afraid in a controversial way. He could cover it no longer. He admitted it to himself.

For the first time, as the fear takes hold of him, he feels that what he has attempted is impossible. He could never reach the top. And yet he strives to climb higher and higher still. And then he lapses into a reverie. He is lost in a deluge and is saved by a battleship. And now on the ladder he was a sudden hope that something as large and stable as the battleship would intervene again to help him. But nothing comes and he keeps climbing. When he reaches there quarters up the gasometer. Flegg suddenly grows desperate and wants to reach the ground as soon as possible. He stops

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climbing and clings to the ladder painting. Tears roll up in his eyes. "Thousance of isolation was overpowering.... He took the first step downwards". Just then he hears the feeble voice of the girl from below saying, "put it back, put it back." When he looks down he discovers to his dismay that someone had removed the painter's ladder. So, now he has no option but to climb higher. He reaches the top rung and discovers again to his bewilderment that the ladder ends there. The real top rungs of the platform juts five impossible feet above. He can't go up; he can't come down either. The story ends here.

The story thus breaks off in the middle like life itself. The theme of isolation has been beautifully interwoven with the texture. The gist of the story is nearly expressed on these lines:- there lay about it a sense not of material dangers, not of the risk of falling, but of something removed and inhuman a sense of appalling isolation.

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