



The Stories of  
William  
Sansom

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# THE STORIES OF WILLIAM SANSOM



*With an Introduction by*

Elizabeth Bowen

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## INTRODUCTION

*By Elizabeth Bowen*

RARE is the writer with command of his powers who absolutely cannot write a short story—if he desire, or if (as may happen) it be desired of him. Few there must be who have not, at one time or another, wanted to try the hand at this form, or found themselves seized by an idea which could be embodied in no way other than this. The writer not sooner or later tempted to try everything, if only to prove to himself that he cannot do it, must be exceptional; might one not say, defective? Incidental short stories of writers by nature given to greater space, or by need bound to the synthesis of the novel, generally warrant attention and give pleasure. Some have the *éclat* of successful command performances. Few quite misfire. Few fail to merit the author's signature or to bear the particular stamp he gives any work. Yet such stories, recognizably, are by-products. One does not feel that they were inevitable. In this, they differ essentially from stories by the short-storyist *par excellence*: the short-storyist by birth, addiction and destiny. Such is William Sansom.

William Sansom, I do not need to point out, has extended himself into other fields. One could say he has experimented *with* extension, and that there has, moreover, been no experiment he has cause regret. His by now six novels are in a position, a foreground, of their own. And of his equal command of the 'short novel' (novelette or *novella*) has he not given us examples? His two travel books exercise a sharp, sensuous fascination: of their kind and in their own manner they are unrivalled. He has mastered the essay; he has manifested a gift for writing for children. It could be that these his other achievements eclipse, for some of his readers, his short stories—as achievements, these others have been substantial and dazzling. Yet the short story remains (it appears to me) the not only ideal but the lasting magnet for all that is most unique in the Sansom art.

Here is a writer whose faculties not only suit the short story but are suited by it—suited and, one may feel, enhanced. This form needs the kind of imagination which is able to concentrate at high power and is most itself when doing so. The tension and pace required by the short story can be stimulating to the right writer of it as they are intimidating to the wrong one: evidently they are stimulating to William Sansom. That need to gain an immediate hold on the reader (a hold which must also be a compulsive one) rules out the writer who is a slow starter: the quick starter, reacting, asks nothing better. There is also the necessity to project, to make seen, and make seen with significance—the short story is for the eye (if the mind's eye). Also the short story, though it high-lights what appears to be reality, is not—cannot wish or afford to be—realistic: it relies on devices, foreshortenings, 'effects'. In the narration there must be an element of conjury, and of that William Sansom is an evident master.

Though all the short stories written by William Sansom are not, I find, present in this collection the thirty-three which are present have been well chosen. (That a reader should be so conscious of those missing testifies to the power those pieces had to stamp themselves on the memory and, indeed, haunt it.) Those here are, one must concede, outstanding examples of their different kinds. Kinds? Or had better say, types of subject—pedantic though that sounds. The wider a storyteller's range, the more unavoidable it becomes that one should classify when attempting to take stock of his whole output. From his wartime London, N.F.S. and fly-bomb period, we have, for instance, those two masterpieces *The Wall* and *Building Alive*. Portrayal of the terrible, or of the nature of terror, reaches three of its

highest levels in *The Vertical Ladder*, *How Claeys Died* and *Among the Dahlias*. Comedy, canine in one case, human in the other, overflows with a cheering rumbustiousness from *Three Dogs of Siena* and *A Contest of Ladies*. That extra dimension of oddness added to humans by their being in a pub or bar, or even in a hotel with the bar closed, appears in *Displaced Persons* (another masterpiece), *Eventide* and *A Game of Billiards*. Of the pursuit of man (or woman) by a fatality, not to be given the slip or shaken off, there are several examples in stories here, the most memorable, and grimmest, being *Various Temptations*. The resignation-reconciliation theme (very pronouncedly a Sansom one) when he writes of courtship, engagements to marry, or marriage) carries to their conclusions two other stories, *A Waning Moon* and *Question and Answer*.

Two of the greatest, at times awesome and certainly most curious powers of this writer appear in two kinds of story not mentioned yet. Where it comes to conveying hallucination, I know few if any who can approach him. (Kipling, possibly, though in another manner?) The fewness of 'pure' hallucination stories in this collection to me is a matter of regret—above all, I hope that this does not mean that this author is reneging on this power? We have, however, the wondrous *A Saving Grace*. The other group, to be identified with the other power, are what one might nominate the great scenic stories: those in which what in the hands of another writer could be called 'background' or 'setting' steps forward, takes over, dominates like a tremendous insatiable star actor, reducing the nominal (human) protagonists to 'extras', to walkers-on. In such Sansom stories, who, what, why and how people are is endlessly less important than where they are. How this can be made to come off, and come off triumphantly, is evident in *My Little Robins*, *Time and Place*, *Gliding Gulls*, *Episode Gastein*, *A Country Walk*, and, to a great extent, two stories already spoken of in another context (and under another heading) *A Waning Moon* and *Question and Answer* .... *Pastorale* is debatable: in some sense, the couple in it defeat the landscape.

To a point, all Sansom stories are scenic stories. Corsica, maritime Provence, Scandinavia, the Highlands of Scotland, the Isles of the West and the past-haunted, mountainous Austrian spa are far from being the only robbers. In this formidable and dismaying world of the Sansom art, no 'inanimate' object is inanimate—mutely, each is either antagonist or accomplice. Influences and effluences are not only at work; they seem the determinants—to a point where mock could be made of human free will. The human is not only the creature of his environment, he becomes its plaything. For the moment, that moment, perhaps, only? But a Sansom moment, given extraordinary extension, so that during it hands may move round round the clock face, the sun set then rise, or leaves be torn from a calendar, is a Sansom story.

This writer's timing, with its expansions and contractions (as though he were playing on an accordion, or squeeze-box) is one of the instances of the trickiness he so well uses—trickiness which (I suggested earlier) a short story not only licences and justifies but demands.

The need for the writer's obtaining compulsive hold on the reader (that is, the reader's imagination) has been referred to. Few, if any, are the occasions when the writer of the stories in this collection allows you or me to slip through his fingers. I suggest that what rivets one to a Sansom story is a form of compulsion, rather than 'interest' in the more usual, leisurely or reflective sense. The characters, the men and women protagonists, are not in themselves 'interesting'—or at least not to me. In the main they are pallid; the few more coloured ones (like Miss Great-Belt, the Danish beauty-contestant in *A Contest of Ladies*) are, often, handsome wound-up automata, jerking through the small ranges of looks and gestures. The fatalism shown by most of these people is, one feels, neither desperate nor romantic; rather, it is the outcome of an incompetence which may shade off at an

moment into sheer impotence. These people do not appeal to us, or attract our sympathies. But to say that they 'fail' to do so would be misleading. Why? Because it has not for a single instant been the creator's intention that they *should* (interest, attract or appeal to us, I mean). The enormous suspense element in a Sansom story is generated in no ordinary way. Since we care little for, or about, these people, do we greatly care what happens to them? Why, no! Then how are we held? We are held not by what happens but by how it happens. The substance of a Sansom story is sensation. The subject is sensation. The emotions are sensations of emotion. The crisis (to be depended upon to be 'sensational' in the accepted sense) is a matter of bringing sensation to a peak where it must either splinter or dissolve because it can no more. Or it may, sometimes, simply, ironically and altogether subside. We accompany, thus, the nominal Sansom 'character' throughout the ups-and-downs of fear, of infatuation, or suspicion, or daydream-success, or amazement, or apprehension, or whatever it be. We ease off during the intermissions, let-ups and pauses allowed by the malady or the ordeal (or, it may be, the delight) only to quiver under the shock of renewed assault.

Held we are: either rooted, like the firemen looking up at the falling wall in *The Wall*, or gummed like the youth scaling the gasometer in *The Vertical Ladder*.

A Sansom story is a *tour de force*. Readers who dislike, mistrust or resent that should turn to something other than this volume. In me these stories induce, also, suspense of another kind, call it sympathetic suspense—will they come off? It is staggering how they do. Their doing so is anything but a matter of fortuity. Nothing here is slapdash or 'got away with'. The writer has taken, and shown himself right in taking, a succession of calculated risks. He is not writing *for* effect, he is dealing *in* it, and masterfully. For his purposes, vocabulary is clearly very important—vocabulary in the literary sense, in the matter of words, yes; but also there has to be a complete command of the vocabulary of the senses. To have knowledge of, to be able to call up into what in the story is actuality, to be able not merely to convey to the reader but impose on him (almost, inflict on him) smells, tastes, sounds rendered complex or curious by acoustics or echoes, differences (as though under the touch) of surfaces, gradations of light and its watery running off into shadow—this was essential for the writing of the Sansom stories. Equally, the writing of these stories, these particular stories, as they come to us, must have been an essential for William Sansom—burdened, he would have otherwise been, with a useless faculty.

Weather is part of the vocabulary. 'The day slate-dark, the air still, the cindertrack by the cottage without life in a watered middle-day light'—is the overture to *Something Terrible, Something Lovely*. The visage of the house in *A Saving Grace* (the house from out of whose open door one by one the dead are to proceed, the dog and all, to group themselves smilingly on the lawn, as though for a photograph), is framed in 'the hour before dusk ... when the hot afternoon is grown old and cool'. There are, again and again, in *A Country Walk*, those weather-passages betraying the terrible animosity of Nature. Such as:

The shadow of a cloud was passing over the map, it came towards him like a fast-moving tide, heaving the hills as it came.

A simple matter? Not so simple. He watched it, he began to judge whether it would envelop him or not. It came at a fast windblown pace, eating up the fields, blotting out life like the edge of a dangerous sea moving in.

The whole countryside grew more inimical. Every deep acre of this ancient sleeping earth breathed a quiet, purposeful life—and it was against him. Not now the simple material conflict with animals—the grave earth itself and the green things growing in collusion with it took on presence and, never moving, breathed a quiet hatred on to the mineral air.

Animals, birds also are part of the vocabulary—they seem, at the moments of their emergence, long to have existed *within* it, behind all words. Corsican robins, the lion at liberty in the middle of the

dahlia-edged path, and those dogs of Siena—Enrico, Osvaldo, Fa. And, in the Hampstead garden  
'isolated at the very top of a tall sapling, crouched on the tapering end of this thin shoot so that it bent  
over under the weight like a burdened spring ... a huge dazed cat'.

*The Stories of William Sansom* speak for themselves. A peril of introduction is that it can go on for  
too long. So this breaks off, though there could be more to say.

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## The Wall

IT was our third job that night.

Until this thing happened, work had been without incident. There had been shrapnel, a few enquiring bombs, and some huge fires; but these were unremarkable and have since merged without identity into the neutral maze of fire and noise and water and night, without date and without hour, with neither time nor form, that lowers mistily at the back of my mind as a picture of the air-raid season.

I suppose we were worn down and shivering. Three a.m. is a meanspirited hour. I suppose we were drenched, with the cold hose water trickling in at our collars and settling down at the tails of our shirts. Without doubt the heavy brass couplings felt moulded from metal-ice. Probably the open roofs of the pumps drowned the petulant buzz of the raiders above, and certainly the ubiquitous fire-gloves made an orange stage-set of the streets. Black water would have puddled the City alleys and I suppose our hands and our faces were black as the water. Black with hacking about among the burnt up rafters. These things were an every-night nonentity. They happened and they were not forgotten because they were never even remembered.

But I do remember it was our third job. And there we were—Len, Lofty, Verno and myself, playing a fifty-foot jet up the face of a tall city warehouse and thinking of nothing at all. You don't think of anything after the first few hours. You just watch the white pole of water lose itself in the fire and you think of nothing. Sometimes you move the jet over to another window. Sometimes the orange dims to black—but you only ease your grip on the ice-cold nozzle and continue pouring careless gallons through the window. You know the fire will fester for hours yet. However, that night the blank indefinite hours of waiting were sharply interrupted—by an unusual sound. Very suddenly a long rattling crack of bursting brick and mortar perforated the moment. And then the upper half of the five-storey building heaved over towards us. It hung there, poised for a timeless second before rumbling down at us. I was thinking of nothing at all and then I was thinking of everything in the world.

In that simple second my brain digested every detail of the scene. New eyes opened at the sides of my head so that, from within, I photographed a hemispherical panorama bounded by the huge length of the building in front of me and the narrow lane on either side.

Blocking us on the left was the squat trailer pump, roaring and quivering with effort. Water throbbed from its overflow valves and from leakages in the hose and couplings. A ceaseless stream spewed down its grey sides into the gutter. But nevertheless a fat iron exhaust pipe glowed red-hot in the middle of the wet engine. I had to look past Lofty's face. Lofty was staring at the controls, hands tucked into his armpits for warmth. Lofty was thinking of nothing. He had a black diamond of soot over one eye, like the White-eyed Kaffir in negative.

To the other side of me was a free run up the alley. Overhead swung a sign—'Catto and Henley'. I wondered what in hell they sold. Old stamps? The alley was quite free. A couple of lengths of dead deflated hose wound over the darkly glistening pavement. Charred flotsam dammed up one of the gutters. A needle of water fountained from a hole in a live hose-length. Beneath a blue shelter light lay a shattered coping stone. The next shop along was a tobacconist's, windowless, with fake display cartons torn open for anybody to see. The alley was quite free.



Behind me, Len and Verno shared the weight of the hose. They heaved up against the strong backward drag of waterpressure. All I had to do was yell 'Drop it'—and then run. We could risk the live hose snaking up at us. We could run to the right down the free alley—Len, Verno and me. But we never moved. I never said 'Drop it' or anything else. That long second held me hypnotized, rubber boots cemented to the pavement. Ton upon ton of red-hot brick hovering in the air above us number all initiative. I could only think. I couldn't move.

Six yards in front stood the blazing building. A minute before I would never have distinguished it from any other drab Victorian atrocity happily on fire. Now I was immediately certain of every minute detail. The building was five storeys high. The top four storeys were fiercely alight. The rooms inside were alive with red fire. The black outside walls remained untouched. And thus, like the lighted carriages of a night express, there appeared alternating rectangles of black and red that emphasized vividly the extreme symmetry of the window spacing: each oblong window shape posed as a vermilion panel set in perfect order upon the dark face of the wall. There were ten windows to each floor making forty windows in all. In rigid rows of ten, one row placed precisely above the other, with strong contrasts of black and red, the blazing windows stood to attention in strict formation. The oblong building, the oblong windows, the oblong spacing. Orange-red colour seemed to *bulge* from the black frame-work, assumed tactile values, like boiling jelly that expanded inside a thick black square grill.

Three of the storeys, thirty blazing windows and their huge frame of black brick, a hundred solid tons of hard, deep Victorian wall, pivoted over towards us and hung flatly over the alley. Whether the descending wall actually paused in its fall I can never know. Probably it never did. Probably it only seemed to hang there. Probably my eyes only digested its action at an early period of momentum, so that I saw it 'off true' but before it had gathered speed.

The night grew darker as the great mass hung over us. Through smoke-fogged fireglow the moonlight had hitherto penetrated to the pit of our alley through declivities in the skyline. Now some of the moonlight was being shut out as the wall hung ever further over us. The wall shaded the moonlight like an inverted awning. Now the pathway of light above had been squeezed to a thin line. That was the only silver lining I ever believed in. It shone out—a ray of hope. But it was a declining hope, for although at this time the entire hemispherical scene appeared static, an imminence of movement could be sensed throughout—presumably because the scene was actually moving. Even the speed of the shutter which closed the photograph on my mind was powerless to exclude this motion from a deeper consciousness. The picture appeared static to the limited surface sense, the eyes and the material brain, but beyond that there was hidden movement.

The second was timeless. I had leisure to remark many things. For instance, that an iron derrick slightly to the left, would not hit me. This derrick stuck out from the building and I could feel its sharpness and hardness as clearly as if I had run my body intimately over its contour. I had time to notice that it carried a foot-long hook, a chain with three-inch rings, two girder supports and a wheel more than twice as large as my head.

A wall will fall in many ways. It may sway over to the one side or the other. It may crumble at the very beginning of its fall. It may remain intact and fall flat. This wall fell as flat as a pancake. It clung to its shape through ninety degrees to the horizontal. Then it detached itself from the pivot and slammed down on top of us.

The last resistance of bricks and mortar at the pivot point cracked off like automatic gun fire. The violent sound both deafened us and brought us to our senses. We dropped the hose and crouched. Afterwards Verno said that I knelt slowly on one knee with bowed head, like a man about to be

knighted. Well, I got my knighting. There was an incredible noise—a thunderclap condensed into the space of an eardrum—and then the bricks and the mortar came tearing and burning into the flesh my face.

Lofty, away by the pump, was killed. Len, Verno and myself they dug out. There was very little brick on top of us. We had been lucky. We had been framed by one of those symmetrical, oblong window spaces.

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## *Difficulty with a Bouquet*

SEAL, walking through his garden, said suddenly to himself: 'I would like to pick some flowers and take them to Miss D.'

The afternoon was light and warm. Tall chestnuts fanned themselves in a pleasant breeze. Among the hollyhocks there was a good humming as the bees tumbled from flower to flower. Seal wore an open shirt. He felt fresh and fine, with the air swimming coolly under his shirt and around his ribs. The summer's afternoon was free. Nothing pressed him. It was a time when some simple, disinterested impulse might well be hoped to flourish.

Seal felt a great joy in the flowers around him and from this a brilliant longing to give. He wished to give quite inside himself, uncritically, without thinking for a moment: 'Here am I, Seal, wishing something.' Seal merely wanted to give some of his flowers to a fellow being. It had happened that Miss D was the first person to come to mind. He was in no way attached to Miss D. He knew her slightly, as a plain, elderly girl of about twenty who had come to live in the flats opposite his garden. If Seal had ever thought about Miss D at all, it was because he disliked the way she walked. She walked stiffly, sailing with her long body while her little legs raced to catch up with it. But he was not thinking of this now. Just by chance he had glimpsed the block of flats as he had stooped to pick a flower. The flats had presented the image of Miss D to his mind.

Seal chose common, ordinary flowers. As the stems broke he whistled between his teeth. He had chosen these ordinary flowers because they were the nearest to hand: in the second place, because they were fresh and full of life. They were neither rare nor costly. They were pleasant, fresh, unassuming flowers.

With the flowers in his hand, Seal walked contentedly from his garden and set foot on the asphalt pavement that led to the block of flats across the way. But as his foot touched the asphalt, as the glare of an old man fixed his eye for the moment of its passing, as the traffic asserted itself, certain misgivings began to freeze his impromptu joy. 'Good heavens,' he suddenly thought, 'what am I doing?' He stepped outside himself and saw Seal carrying a bunch of cheap flowers to Miss D in the flats across the way.

'These are cheap flowers,' he thought. 'This is a sudden gift, I shall smile as I hand them to her. We shall both know that there is no ulterior reason for the gift and thus the whole action will smack of goodness—of goodness and simple brotherhood. And somehow ... for that reason this gesture of mine will appear to be the most calculated pose of all. Such a simple gesture is improbable. The improbable is to be suspected. My gift will certainly be regarded as an affectation.'

'Oh, if only I had some reason—aggrandizement, financial gain, seduction—any of the accepted motives that would return my flowers to social favour. But no—I have none of these in me. I only wish to give and to receive nothing in return.'

As he walked on, Seal could see himself bowing and smiling. He saw himself smile too broadly and he apologized by exaggeration for his good action. His neck flinched with disgust as he saw himself assume the old bravados. He could see the mocking smile of recognition on the face of Miss D.

Seal dropped the flowers into the gutter and walked slowly back to his garden.

From her window high up in the concrete flats, Miss D watched Seal drop the flowers. How fresh they looked! How they would have livened her barren room! 'Wouldn't it have been nice,' thought

Miss D, 'if that Mr Seal had been bringing *me* that pretty bouquet of flowers! Wouldn't it have been nice if he had picked them in his own garden and—well, just brought them along, quite casually, and made me a present of the delightful afternoon.' Miss D dreamed on for a few minutes.

Then she frowned, rose, straightened her suspender belt, hurried into the kitchen. 'Thank God I didn't,' she sighed to herself. 'I should have been most embarrassed. It's not as if he wanted me. It would have been just too maudlin for words.'

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## Something Terrible, Something Lovely

THE day slate-dark, the air still, the cindertrack by the cottages empty and without life in a water-midday light—and young Nita came running, running home from school. Her satchel swung behind her, the blue exercise book fluttered its white leaves in her windmill hand, thin long legs and young-boned knees pranced before her like the separate legs of a pony careering the rest of her along. High on the brow of the slope that led down to the cottages she was already singing it out: ‘Dody, Dody!’ so that her young voice shrill with life and so excited echoed round the black cindertrack, the emptiness of that path, sang in and out of the bricked cottage yards, rained against blind windows, rained and died with the tops of the green elms above the grey roofs, above the smoke that seemed to smoulder from the chimneys of cooked meat and coal.

Dody, her younger cousin, was squatting in the yard winding a little gramophone. The gramophone disc rotated at a wild speed, hurrying round ever faster to tin out a shrill voice that pranced up and down, as though its very bladder were bursting among the blazers and the pier-stage somewhere down the dark tin horn, screaming among the old jazz instruments to get off the stage and out of the box. ‘Swanee, Swanee, How I love you, *How I love you ...*’ When Nita banged through the wooden yard gate and clustered herself feverishly down, all in one piece, satchel, hat, skirts, curls, like a bird alighting with wings askew by Dody’s ear, the gramophone went on singing. She put her arm round Dody’s neck and breathlessly whispered into her ear. Dody’s eyes went round and fascinated, her mouth pressed itself small as though she would cry: the voice kept whispering, Nita’s eyes opened and shut and rolled with every terrible word, her head waved from side to side, retreated, then back came to those lips, wet and hot with breath close to the ear. ‘I saw it ... there, right in front it was, plain as day ... I don’t know how long, I’m sure ... anyone could see ...’ In short, dreadful gasps the whisper came out, the chattering secret. A silence, long and wise, as the two girls squatted and gazed at each other. Then from Dody a deep, heart-blown sigh. From Nita a nod, then emphatic quickening nods, one after the other, racing up to get breath to tell it all again, the lovely terrible thing.

For nothing like this had ever happened before—that was plain from the start. There had been terrible things before, as when the sweetshop woman fell on the line two summers ago, on a hot afternoon, and the train had run right over her. That was terrible, especially as it had been a picnic afternoon, hot and all the flowers out—but it was funny, too, when they made jokes afterwards about strawberry jam. And there was the time when the Leadbetters had suddenly gone: one day there were all the Leadbetters, seven of them from Granny Leadbetter to little Angela, living in the cottage on the door from the end—and then the next day they’d gone, there were no Leadbetters! A van had called, people said, in the night. Not a stick of a table or a chair was left in the cottage. The cottage was there still, Number Six still, but no Leadbetters! And nobody would say why or how. People knew, but there was something awful that they would never tell. They frowned, they pressed their lips into ruler-lines. ‘Don’t ask no questions,’ they said, ‘and you know what you won’t be told none of.’ Nita and Dody had asked for weeks, they had stood outside Number Six and peered into the windows. They had rattled the back door and kicked the empty bottles. The newspaper man had even left the Sunday paper sticking in the letterbox, the dead letterbox. Since then, no Leadbetter had ever been seen. They had gone in a hush. There was something nasty about the Leadbetters.

Those events were memorable but they were memories only, misted and vague as the uncley sort of

God one heard stories about in Sunday School. But here—here was something new, alive, overwhelming, something that was happening now, at the very minute, as the clock ticked, as the church bell tolled! The church bell just then tolled suddenly, like some great celestial dustbin-lid beaten against the grey sky, and then started its measured echoing march through the September air on Wednesday noon. The children whispered frantically. The gramophone whirred round grating and clicking; the singing had stopped. All about that little yard, with its washing hanging abandoned, its pramwheels and cans and its derelict wooden hutch—all this stayed empty and desolate as the cinderpath. But the children felt none of it. They saw none of the lowering green leaves against the slatey sky with its white-bottomed clouds, nor the vegetable green of the little leaves climbing the elm-trunks, nor the old tin shelters with the weeds in them and the jars of dried paintbrushes, nor the allotment beyond, nor the blanched grey of the walls of the seven cottages—a scene of only grey and heavy green and cinder-black.

‘What shall we do? What shall we do ...?’ chattered Dody to Nita and Nita to Dody, making backwards and forwards glances wise and sophisticated, lunatic and tender. At eight and nine years of age their faces were old in gesture, their expression poised into magical replicas of feelings that they seemed to expect rather than experience. And suddenly Nita was saying over for the twentieth time ‘Who could have done it? Who *could* have done it?’ Dody jumped up and clapped her hands and began dancing. ‘Dody knows, Dody knows what we’ll do ...’ she sang, chanted, repeated hopping round the yard with her eyes brilliant and mad. She suddenly ran back to Nita and said what was very simple, but to these two an idea of impossible daring, a breath-taking stroke. ‘It was a boy done it,’ Dody said. ‘So we’ll do it back on the boys!’

They both gasped. Nita’s hand was up at her mouth. She was going to cry or to laugh, something was bursting in her. But all she did was to say in a little voice, not exactly her own: ‘What’ll we do then?’

Dody laughed and screamed delightedly: ‘We’ll do it back on the boys ...’

‘What? What though?’ whispered Nita, who knew.

‘The same, the same!’ screamed Dody, then clapped her hand over her mouth.

Nita nestled close up to her, took her arm, ran over to the corner of the yard, then whispered more slowly but with her eyes bright with appetite for the words she knew would come but only wanted to hear over and over again: ‘Tell, tell! Tell me what we’ll do, Dody ...’

Dody bent her head and whispered it again.

\*

Their hot dinner never seemed to be going to end, though that in itself was delicious. Nita’s Mum in her apron still, gave them their mutton boiled juicy grey and the white wet potatoes. And although Nita and Dody kept tittering, staring at each other across the cruet with fearful eyes, they were looking down at their plates and spooning round the barley in that gluey pale gravy. Nita’s Mum kept asking them what was the matter. Then they hung their heads, continuing on a lower plane and with slanted eyes the same exchange of secret glances and held giggles. Once Nita sang out, ‘Oh dear, what can the matter be?’—but Dody, crammed with barley, nearly choked herself, and at this Nita’s Mum lost patience and told them to go straight up to their bedroom without any pudding. And that was just what they wanted, to slide out on the linoleum, with the blessed door closed behind them, to leap up the stairs away from the white table-cloth and its bread-crumbs, up to the bedspread where they just burst themselves laughing and where Nita suddenly stopped and said confidentially: ‘Tell, tell.’

Half an hour later Dody said, ‘Where’s your box? We’ll need the you-know-what ...’

Nita’s face fell, suddenly blank, as though now there was something to hide. She fidgeted. Then she

looked up tearfully. 'I forgot, I haven't got any.'

Dody jumped up appalled. 'Where is it? Where is it?' And when Nita pointed miserably to the washstand where, between the soap-dish and the white water-jug a pencil-box jutted out woodenly—she ran across the room and fingered it open in a second. Inside there were ink-stains, a green Koh-noor, a stub of pink rubber stabbed with black pencil-marks, two paper-clip-hair-pins. Dody turned round wailing, 'There isn't any. There isn't any ...'

At which Nita sat bolt upright and said, thoughtfully, tragically, slowly: 'At any rate, I've still got my penny.'

'Your penny!'

'My penny.'

'PENNY!'

In a moment they were chattering again, the penny was out, they were fingering it with love, and Dody said again and again: 'We can get lots of it now.'

'Lots of what?'

'Lots of you-know-what!'

'When?'

'Oh, now, now, now now now ...'

Nita rose then to her feet, a dreadful pallor straining her face with age and sickness. 'Oh,' she said, 'it's Wednesday!'

'*Wednesday!*' Dody mouthed after her, as though she were munching something she would never swallow. 'Shop's shut!'

\*

That night they knew they would do it tomorrow. That night was as long as one of the nights sometime before Christmas, when Christmas is near yet still will never hurry nearer, as long too as the nights of early bed in the summer when the windows were open and the music of the fair came so clearly across the common. That night the windows were open too, but outside it was dark, dark and warm, telling about the winter in the wrong way, without any cold, and thus in a queer way threatening; like some Monday nights in the kitchen with the washing about, when nobody could be bothered with you, when the minutes stopped altogether and no treats lay ahead. Tonight though, there was something ahead, but still there was the waiting, and so the room lay deadly and the electric light beaming out at the back dull and unmoving.

They were told off for bed early, as soon as that September dark came down, and when they had washed nestled near on the big pillow, sucking the stringy ends of the white coverlet, making caves under the pillow and telling, over and over again, telling. Word for word Dody knew and Nita knew exactly what was to happen, but the words themselves had to be repeated, and each time marvellously they brought the picture succulently clear.

'When'll we go to the shop?' Nita whispered.

'In breaktime.'

'What'll we ask for?'

'Chalk.'

'A ha'penny-worth?'

'Pennyworth! A whole pennyworth?'

Then there was a giggling, and suddenly Nita stopped. Her voice sounded terrified, and as though she wanted to be terrified. 'And what if someone sees? What if one of the boys comes round the corner just then, and sees?'

Dody mouthed fiercely, idiotically with her tongue stuck out in the dark: 'We'll run and run and run and *run!*'

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But the telling could only last minutes at a time. In between they lay in silence, thinking hard, the thoughts racing, but far too fast for the minutes, or for the long-drawn-out darkness marked only by faint noises from downstairs, from Nita's mum's cough, from Dad's rustling paper. The light from the stairs came through the door and made a patch like a clown's hat on the ceiling. There was a soap smell.

Once, much later, as they were at last nearly asleep, Dody pushed her head nearer and whispered much nearer than before, and as though she had been thinking of this all the time: 'I say, Nita ...'

Nita whispered: 'Yes?'

'I say you don't ... do you?'

A pause, fearful and long. 'Don't what, Dody?'

Dody breathed quickly. 'Love Stan?'

The pillow heaved up, it was Nita turning and pressing her face hard into the pillow, gritting her teeth, stopping herself from saying anything, from crying, from laughing, from screaming, from showing any of herself even in the dark. The dark whirled round her like a bluish. But then her head was up again and she laughed: 'Who, me? What do you take *me* for?'

\*

The next day was dull and low-clouded as before, the pale smoke from the cottage chimney pencilled up paler than the sky, almost white against the dying green of the beeches above: pencilled then blew suddenly down untidily on to the roofs, as though some huge invisible bird had swooped past. There were the beginnings of small winds, but the day was too heavy for them; the grey roofs seemed to shine against such a weight of dullness.

Though Dody and Nita had awoken early, breakfast was a scramble—and they went off to school much earlier than usual. But outside the school gates and in the playground there lay a vast emptiness as though nothing were ever to happen again—nobody there, the doors open, and the clock outside resting its gold hands at half-past eight. That clock seemed to have stopped. And when at last the other children came first drifting then running hot-faced in, and school was assembled, the other clock in the inky oak classroom seemed also to keep stopping. So the morning dawdled, stopping and dragging towards eleven.

At half-past ten their excitement returned, they began to feel the eyes of the others, their secret grew huge and vulnerable again. Earlier, Nita had stared blushing at the book, sure that the other children knew and were looking and laughing at her: but soon, when she had looked round, it had been disappointing to see that no one at all was taking any notice of her. Now, at twenty-five to eleven, the feeling came back: soon they were to do this thing and so it seemed that everyone knew about it. By five to eleven they were looking at each other and at the clock, it seemed an endless time—when a miracle happened! The Mistress suddenly shut the book from which she had been reading and herself looked up at the clock. Just then the clock jumped a minute forward, and this must have decided her for she smiled and said: 'All right. Off you go—*quietly*, children.'

They walked to the door and then bolted down the steps and out on to the asphalt, out through the gate and never stopped until they were at the shop. Nita handed over her penny clasped hot and stayed outside while Dody went in. The shop-door bell rang loud and crisp like a tram-bell, much too loud and startling, so that Nita looked fearfully up and down the street. If the boys heard, they would know—*for sure, for sure!* But there was only a soldier in washed blue sitting on a bench, two old ladies with shopping baskets looking at a cat. The cat rubbed itself up against their black skirts and the ladies



laughed, one stroked it with her stick. The street had an empty look, no cars, no bicycles, and thus seemed all the more empty for the ringing and echoing chattering cries of all the children hidden away in the playground round the corner. The bell clanged again and Dody crashed out holding something small and hard against her breast, and nodding with her chin right in, and holding out urgently one hand to drag Nita in the direction her legs seemed already to be running. They ran together, away from the school, and Dody whispered: 'Yellow and white pieces she gave me—lots—come on ...'

Up the road, up the steep road, higher and higher up to the asylum! The asylum tower, purple and green, stood out above them, very near, but the asylum wall was really much further away when you were down in the streets. And the streets suddenly ended, the common began. They raced along hurrying against the minutes, the fifteen minutes of Break, and came to where the may-bushes started and the ground rose to meet the beginning of the tall asylum wall.

Here a chalky, scrap-grass path led in between the may-bushes. Along this they ran, along by the rainy smell from under the bushes. The wall came suddenly, and then the path continued straight between the wall, high and purple and iron-spiked on the top, and the dark underneath of the straggling may-bush wood. The may stopped, and the other bushes withering dark-green with their dusty crimson berries—and Nita stopped too. Dody stopped. They could peer out now at the huge asylum wall curling out into the open, standing high and commanding over the open common. Deep purple and darker glazed bricks, severe and authoritative, glowered at the open grass that fanned away on all sides, down from it. This wall was the summit point of the common, the place to which everyone eventually walked—and now Nita pointed in its direction and whispered: 'Look! Look! *There!*'

They looked round then fearfully. No one in sight. Only the bare common, gorse, chalk-patched dying grass. They left the may-bushes and raced off up towards the wall, two small figures growing smaller up the slope, growing murky like half-seen flies in all that dull, dead common-land.

Later, when they had gone, the wall still stood glowering out over the empty common. Once watery sunlight opened up and for a moment chalk boulders and something metal like a can winked weakly, the pale copper-green asylum cupola glittered into transient life. Then it was as dark, darker than before. A single cyclist was drawn slowly as on a string across some distant intersecting path. The leaves of the few straggling trees hung still, dark green and hardened, shrunk to the last point before they would turn colour. And on the wall, intimately lonely among the greater loneliness of the weather and that wide vacant space, there could be read two messages written in chalk, white on the purple brick, spidery and scrawled straight capital letters, words that looked bare and cold out there in the open:

NITA HOBBS LOVES STAN CHUTER.

A long chalk line had been drawn through this, and underneath was written emphatically, with yellow first letters to each word:

THE PERSON WHO WROTE THIS IS DAFT.

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## *Displaced Persons*

HAVE you watched Time eating at a place? The bearded jaws tearing unseen at the air of a still room, the stiller for so many silent people, the stiller for a drying-off of thought and of the motions of building that alone can compensate for the wolfish mouthfuls of living every minute hugely lost? The voracious bearded jaws, biting off the air, always up somewhere near the ceiling between the frieze and the quiet electric cord?

The Indian House stood furnaced in melancholy red by a September sunset; such a light was brass-spacious, and seemed to glow up from below, underlining thus the shadows and the tall empty windows of that immense Indian-built warehouse in such a way that a sense of desolation and black-veiled sorrowers, of a Second Coming made a funeral of the Indian part, of the brownish plastered façade of an already mournful London evening. But there were no black-bowed figures, no figures at all, the pillared and domed warehouse stood irrevocably empty, consumed within by its own void and on the outside, reflecting on mogulish plaster screens and friezes, by the faraway funeral red. Such a dead design was of course accentuated by the business in its forecourt, where there were piled and strewn huge chunks of grey granite and rough white marble, material for the grinding of tombstones. Strange wooden hoisting devices stood about, lashed and poised, like derelict siege catapults. But the tombstone industry was silent, it was past six o'clock, the only movement was to be sensed across the road, across the tramlines and under the overhead wires, where the doors of the Admiral's Discretion stood open.

Inside, in the wan electric light, between walls of faded orange, they were drinking. Little noise they talked, worriedly, in whispers, leaning slightly towards each other. When the bell of the cash-till rang, one of them started, looked up for a moment bewildered; he shook his head and then, as though there was nothing else to be done, slowly as though the whole world and the rest of time were empty and could provide no further move, slowly the hand reached to his waistcoat pocket and from there he drew out a small silvery machine. With this, without looking, sinking back, he rolled a cigarette. He had the face of a pale pike, grey all over and greyer where the stubble grew; on his head was pulled down hard a fawn-coloured homburg with a greased silk brim.

This man was sitting in that untidy corner improvised by the door bolted open. Along from him, on the same polished pine bench perforated by so many holes, a small straight-necked woman in navy blue serge sat alone; her hair jet-black, her cheeks flushed with rouge, the very white skin at the back of her neck grained with black ticks where she had been shaved for her shingle, her eyes hardly visible under the felt of a pale blue hat. She was looking at a picture hanging on the wall above, a military scene framed in fumed oak. When this woman with the straight neck and the blinding hat looked up her whole body had to swing back so that she could see at all. Now, at such a tortured angle, she watched a grey Cardigan charging his Light Brigade into the fly-blown Russian cannon at Balaclava. After a while, a long while, as the electric clock pounced on, as the September sunset through the frosted glass burned darker, as the beer slowly sank in the glasses all around, as this beer then tasted round the teeth and the palates of those mouths and sank again to wash pooling behind waistcoats and the grimed elastic of corsets—after a while, the woman pursed her lips, swung herself vertical, took a peck at the stout-glass, and then with a slight brown froth on her upper lip re-elevated herself towards the Cardigan. She remained in this position, strained; but more as if she were waiting for something

happen there in the bar than for Cardigan to make a move.

Indeed this same sensation of waiting hung over all those others who stood singly or in groups round the semicircular bar. They all faced inwards, as though the expected and long-awaited happening might only occur at the pivot of their yellow pine semicircle, the central point where the cast-metal cash-till stood beneath its awning of draped Union Jacks and cards into which were stitched little bottles of aspirin tablets. To either side of the till stood and leant the two bar-tenders, salo women of uncertain age, one spectacled and frizz-haired, the other taller and sleeker and provided with a jaw so enormous that it was weak—but both pale and slightly moist of skin. They also were waiting. Leaning with their backs to the bottles they stared vacantly just above the heads of the people who circled them. When one or other of the drinkers motioned for his glass to be refilled, one of the attendants would walk over the intervening space—and what a fine, round space, with the drinkers hemmed so close against their pale wood railing!—and enquire the nature of the request still with his eyes raised just so slightly above the drinker's head. And these drinkers would receive their new glasses mournfully and remain staring inwards towards the till.

But some talked. There was a naval captain accompanied by two ladies and an elderly man wearing a cap, a stiff white collar and a tweed coat. This elderly man carried the rough walking-stick of the retired. And the ladies! One had dyed her hair blonde, so that from behind she looked quite like a young girl; but that the bobbed hair hung straggled over a neck that shrunk away from it—and, of course, when she turned her head, one saw the face of disaster, painted in bright American colour, lifted, stitched up, the new-born virgin of fifty with thin fallen-in lips and every line pouched to a fever-pitch of anxiety: anxiety, but for the eyes, pale, filmed, popping out but not caring. Her sister wore the unmistakable marks of the tropics, the ancient tan, the melancholy wasted skin and the iron-grey hair, the seedy sportswoman and bridge-queen into whose attire there always crept the touch of silk that once had brought an *hauteur* to the far-flung club of stranded values where, for so many long and now finished years, her honeymoon had slowly set. The naval captain had eyes with a furtive, trustless twinkle. He stood drowned in a dark naval raincoat. The four of them drank long water and whiskies—and often nodded. Yet, however much they nodded, however many times they reasserted the Tightness of the world, they too seemed to be waiting: the woman with the blonde hair often looked up at that pouncing clock, the elderly gentleman coughed and turned away and turned back again, the naval captain and his sportswoman stood opposite each other and jigged from toe to heel like automatic toys, without ever stopping.

Two white-faced boys then lurched in, giggling. But when they faced up to the bar, the realization of some manly inheritance turned their cheeks suddenly red, as though a neon gas was momentarily infused into them, and then as quickly the new colour faded, so that their faces were white again, faintly greyed with oil—and they ordered ginger beer and bowed their heads over a black bicycle bell. Youth was to have its watery fling! Two others, older, idler, with strapping padded shoulders and about them a sprinkling of brassy gold, on their fingers, their ties, in their teeth—these two with the flat pints leant eagerly over the little balls in the pin-table machine. Eager, and thin-lipped. Between such feverish pulls and pokes at the machine, these two also lounged back and looked up at the clock, at the door, at the fading light; they were waiting, like the others, for the something that would never happen.

But, surprisingly, it did. Suddenly into this hushed air, with its whispers, its shufflings of feet, its dead chinking, and above all and over everything its pervading, soundless whirring of the small yellow electric light bulb, that constant thing, unshaded, throwing its wan unmoving light straight at the top corners where the ceiling met those strange orange walls—now into this hush there broke a sudden

huge sound. It exploded in from the street, with no warning—the deafening metal burst of a barrel organ.

What happened then was ubiquitous, the same small movement jerked all that drinking room, and the faces of the drinkers—each face moved slowly round towards the door and there hung, for a second as if out of joint, pressed forward slightly off the equilibrium of the neck; mouths opened for a breath, more breath; eyes blank but in their fixedness intent upon peering through the fog of shock. Everybody looked at the door. Nobody saw anything.

The barrel organ must have been placed just beyond the upright jambs, probably on the pavement neatly squared with the wall so that the room formed an extra sounding box; indeed, something new and dark was flushed against the frosted glass. The pike-faced man was staring straight into the bolted door, some six inches from his stony bewildered snout. The naval officer and those others had stopped talking, the bar-girls had each lowered their eyes so that now they peered through the drinkers instead of above them. The bicycle bell lay abandoned in the oily boy's hand, slackly extended forward, as if it were offered to the door as a warm wet present. The pin-table youths had struck subtly the attitude of boxers, toes preened, shoulders high and heads forward—while behind them their last little silver balls went hurrying round the garish presentation of a painted, modern city, flashing on lights in the urgent accumulation of silver, red, green, yellow and pale-blue skyscrapers, among meteor planes and overhead railways, among the short skirts of citizens dressed in rubbery romanish-mediaeval toguettes of the twenty-first century. These lights, in fact, provided now the only movement, they snowballed on and off, faster and faster like a gale warning. And the gale, the metal-belling wind churning through the door rushed straight about that room, entering it and filling it immediately like a flood-wind grasping round the crevices among the bottles, under the bar, up to the corners at the very ceiling and down underneath the serge-skirted woman's ankles, round and about Lord Cardigan and everyone who was there, filling, filling the void absolutely. And when this in that thunderous second was done and the place was a block of sound—so other small movements hesitated and began. Smiles! Nods! Shufflings of feet! For at last the explosion was recognized to be music, and well-loved music, a tune of warmth and reminiscence, a war-time tune:

‘Bless ’em all, bless ’em all,  
The long and the short and the tall——’

This music rang round the bar, again and again, a circling tune that came back every few seconds where it had started and then went off again, round and round, waltzing and merry despite its metallic fibre.

But merry to no applause. For one by one, like the lights on the pin-table, the smiles cut out. The faces dropped. The heads turned back towards the bar. The shufflings of feet, the beginning of a dance stopped. The morose emptiness returned; and with it, unceasing, whirling round the room, the giddy music continued. There was no echo. The sound was hard, bright, filling the empty room with metallic rods that clashed for breath; only that sound, exact, reporting without echo.

The drinkers drank without flinching. It was suddenly plain—they were beyond flinching, just as they had been beyond keeping up the first smile that had for a moment seemed to warm them. It was just not worth it.

I was reminded then of two things, both strangely to do with big dogs—perhaps dogs with faces so heavy and eyes as mournful as those that now gazed in again at the cash-till. One of these dogs was the bloodhound once seen at the bottom of an escalator in a Tube station. This dog sat like a rock on the

platform at the very edge of the immense progression of upward moving empty stairs. His master tried to urge him on, patting, whispering, purring, whistling, and once even kicking. But move the dog would not. He sat absolutely. He sat and stared sadly at the ceaseless stairs emerging from the ground and travelling emptily upwards to Heaven. He seemed to be nodding and saying to himself: 'There's that's another thing they've done ...'

The other dog is to be found in a quotation from Henri de Montherlant. He writes: '... And for a long time the baron, sitting in his chair, kept that beautiful gravity of face that men get—it almost gives them the illusion of thoughtfulness—when they lose money. Then he sighed. Newfoundland dogs often have a little humidity at the commissure of the eyes, falling like tears. Why do Newfoundland dogs cry? Because they have been tricked.'

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## *The Vertical Ladder*

AS he felt the first watery eggs of sweat moistening the palms of his hands, as with every run higher his body seemed to weigh more heavily, this young man Flegg regretted in sudden desperation but still in vain, the irresponsible events that had thrust him up into his present precarious climb. Here he was, isolated on a vertical iron ladder flat to the side of a gasometer and bound to climb higher and higher until he should reach the vertiginous skyward summit.

How could he ever have wished this on himself? How easy it had been to laugh away his cautious fears on the firm ground ... now he would give the very hands that clung to the ladder for a safe conduct to solid earth.

It had been a strong spring day, abruptly as warm as midsummer. The sun flooded the parks and streets with sudden heat—Flegg and his friends had felt stifled in their thick winter clothes. The green glare of the new leaves everywhere struck the eye too fiercely, the air seemed almost sticky from the exhalations of buds and swelling resins. Good winter senses were overcome—the girls had complained of headaches—and their thoughts had grown confused and uncomfortable as the wool underneath rubbed against their skins. They had wandered out from the park by a back gate, into an area of back streets.

The houses there were small and old, some of them already falling into disrepair; short streets of cobbles, narrow pavements, and the only shops a tobacconist or a desolate corner oil-shop to color the grey—it was the outcrop of some industrial undertaking beyond. At first these quiet, almost deserted streets had seemed more restful than the park; but soon a dusty air of peeling plaster and powdering brick, the dark windows and the dry stone steps, the very dryness altogether had proved more wearying than before, so that when suddenly the houses ended and the ground open to reveal the yards of a disused gasworks, Flegg and his friends had welcomed the green of nettles and milkweed that grew among the scrap-iron and broken brick.

They walked out into the wasteland, the two girls and Flegg and the other two boys, and stood presently before the old gasometer itself. Among the ruined sheds this was the only erection still a whole, it still predominated over the yards, towering high above other buildings for hundreds of feet around. So they threw bricks against its rusted sides.

The rust flew off in flakes and the iron rang dully. Flegg, who wished to excel in the eyes of the dark-haired girl, began throwing his bricks higher than the others, at the same time lobbing them, to suggest that he knew something of grenade-throwing, claiming for himself vicariously the glamour of a uniform. He felt the girl's eyes follow his shoulders, his shoulders broadened. She had black eyes unshadowed beneath short wide-awake lids, as bright as a boy's eyes; her lips pouted with difficulty over a scramble of irregular teeth, so that it often looked as if she were laughing; she always frowned—and Flegg liked her earnest, purposeful expression. Altogether she seemed a wide-awake girl who would be the first to appreciate an active sort of a man. Now she frowned and shouted: 'Bet you can't climb as high as you can throw!'

Then there began one of those uneasy jokes, innocent at first, that taken seriously can accumulate into a hysterical accumulation of spite. Everyone recognizes this underlying unpleasantness, it is plainly felt; but just because of this the joke must at all costs be pressed forward, one becomes frightened, one laughs all the louder, pressing to drown the embarrassments of danger and guilt. The third boy had instantly shouted: 'Course he can't, he can't climb no higher than himself.'

Flegg turned round scoffing, so that the girl had quickly shouted again, laughing shrilly and pointing upwards. Already all five of them felt uneasy. Then in quick succession, all in a few seconds the third boy had repeated: 'Course he bloody can't.' Flegg had said: 'Climb to the top of anything.' The other boy had said: 'Climb to the top of my aunt Fanny.' The girl had said: 'Climb to the top of the gasworks then.'

Flegg had said: 'That's nothing.' And the girl, pressing on then as she had to, suddenly introduced the inevitable detail that made these suppositions into fact: 'Go on then, climb it. Here—tie my hand on the top. Tie my flag to the top.'

Even then Flegg had a second's chance. It occurred to him instantly that he could laugh it off; but an hysterical emphasis now possessed the girl's face—she was dancing up and down and clapping her hands insistently—and this confused Flegg. He began stuttering after the right words. But the words refused to come. At all costs he had to cover his stuttering. So: 'Off we go then!' he had said. And he had turned to the gasometer.

It was not, after all, so very high. It was hardly a full-size gasometer, its trellised iron top-rails would have stood level with the roof-coping of a five-or six-storey tenement. Until then Flegg had only seen the gasometer as a rough mass of iron, but now every detail sprang into abrupt definition. He studied it intently, alertly considering its size and every feature of stability, the brown rusted iron sheeting smeared here and there with red lead, a curious buckling that sometimes deflated its curved bulk as though a vacuum were collapsing it from within, and the ladders scaling the sides flush with the sheeting. The grid of girders, a complexity of struts, the bolting.

There were two ladders, one a Jacob's ladder, clamped fast to the side, another that was more of a staircase, zigzagging up the belly of the gasometer in easy gradients and provided with a safety rail. This must have been erected later as a substitute for the Jacob's ladder, which demanded an unnecessarily stringent climb and was now in fact in disuse, for some twenty feet of its lower rungs had been worn away; however, there was apparently some painting in progress, for a wooden painter's ladder had been propped beneath with its head reaching to the undamaged bottom of the vertical ladder—the ascent was thus serviceable again. Flegg looked quickly at the foot of the wooden ladder—was it well grounded?—and then at the head farther up—was this secure?—and then up to the top, screwing his eyes to note any fault in the iron rungs reaching innumerable and indistinctly, like the dizzying strata of a zip, to the summit platform.

Flegg, rapidly assessing these structures, never stopped sauntering forward. He was committed, and so while deliberately sauntering to appear thus the more at ease, he knew that he must never hesitate. The two boys and his own girl kept up a chorus of encouraging abuse. 'How I climbed Mount Everest,' they shouted. 'He'll come down quicker'n he went up.' 'Mind you don't bang your head on a harp, Sir Galahad.' But the second girl had remained quiet throughout; she was already frightened, sensing instantly that the guilt for some tragedy was hers alone—although she had never in fact opened her mouth. Now she chewed passionately on gum that kept her jaws firm and circling.

Suddenly the chorus rose shriller. Flegg had veered slightly towards the safer staircase. His eyes had naturally questioned this along with the rest of the gasometer, and almost unconsciously his footsteps had veered in the direction of his eyes; then this instinct had emerged into full consciousness—perhaps he could use the staircase, no one had actually instanced the Jacob's ladder, there might yet be a chance? But the quick eyes behind him had seen, and immediately the chorus rose: 'No you don't!' 'Not up those sissy stairs!' Flegg switched his course by only the fraction that turned him again to the perpendicular ladder. 'Who's talking about stairs?' he shouted back.

Behind him they still kept up a din, still kept him up to pitch, worrying at him viciously. 'Look

him, he doesn't know which way to go—he's like a ruddy duck's uncle without an aunt.'

So that Flegg realized finally that there was no alternative. He had to climb the gasometer by the vertical ladder. And as soon as this was finally settled, the doubt cleared from his mind. He braced his shoulders and suddenly found himself really making light of the job. After all, he thought, it isn't so high? Why should I worry? Hundreds of men climb such ladders each day, no one falls, the ladders are clamped as safe as houses? He began to smile within himself at his earlier perturbations. Added to this, the girl now ran up to him and handed him her handkerchief. As her black eyes frowned a smile at him, he saw that her expression no longer held its vicious laughing scorn, but now instead had grown softer, with a look of real encouragement and even admiration. 'Here's your flag,' she said. And then she even added: 'Tell you what—you don't really have to go! I'll believe you!' But that came too late. Flegg had accepted the climb, it was fact, and already he felt something of an exhilarating glow of glory. He took the handkerchief, blew the girl a dramatic kiss, and started up the lowest rungs of the ladder at a run.

This painter's ladder was placed at a comfortable slant. But nevertheless Flegg had only climbed some ten feet—what might have corresponded to the top of a first-floor window—when he began to slow up, he stopped running and gripped harder at the rungs above and placed his feet more firmly on the unseen bars below. Although he had not yet measured his distance from the ground, somehow he sensed distinctly that he was already unnaturally high, with nothing but air and a precarious skeleton of wooden bars between him and the receding ground. He felt independent of solid support; yet according to his eyes, which stared straight forward at the iron sheeting beyond, he might have been still standing on the lowest rungs by the ground. The sensation of height infected him strongly, it had become an urgent necessity to maintain a balance, each muscle of his body became unnaturally alert. This was not an unpleasant feeling, he almost enjoyed a new athletic command of every precarious movement. He climbed then methodically until he reached the ladderhead and the first of the perpendicular iron rungs.

Here for a moment Flegg had paused. He had rested his knees up against the last three steps of the safely slanting wooden ladder, he had grasped the two side supports of the rusted iron that led straightly upwards. His knees then clung to the motherly wood, his hands felt the iron cold and gritty. The rust powdered off and smeared him with its red dust; one large scrap flaked off and fell on to his face as he looked upwards. He wanted to brush this away from his eye, but the impulse was, to his surprise, much less powerful than the vice-like will that clutched his hands to the iron support. His hand remained firmly gripping the iron, he had to shake off the rust-flake with a jerk of his head. Even then this sharp movement nearly unbalanced him, and his stomach gulped coldly with sudden shock. He settled his knees more firmly against the wood, and though he forced himself to laugh at the sudden fear, so that in some measure his poise did really return, nevertheless he did not alter the awkward knock-kneed position of his legs patently clinging for safety. With all this he had scarcely paused. Now he pulled at the staunchions of the iron ladder, they were as firm as if they had been driven into rock.

He looked up, following the dizzying rise of the rungs to the skyline. From this angle flat against the iron sheeting, the gasometer appeared higher than before. The blue sky seemed to descend and almost touch it. The redness of the rust dissolved into a deepening grey shadow, the distant curve of the summit loomed over black and high. Although it was immensely stable, as seen in rounded perspective from a few yards away, there against the side it appeared top heavy, so that this huge segment of sheet iron seemed to have lost the support of its invisible complement behind, the support that was now unseen and therefore unfelt, and Flegg imagined despite himself that the entire erection



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