

The Vertical Ladder

William Sansom

Cambridge English Language Learning



The Vertical Ladder

by William Sansom

edited by H.L.B. Moody

Below the ordinary events of everyday life, serious issues are often hidden.

A group of young people, three boys and two girls, are wandering about on a public holiday in the deserted areas of a large, rather decayed industrial city. They are all friends, but there are certain tensions in the group. In a light-hearted way they enter into what seems to be a good-natured joke, but as the situation develops, things change dramatically.

This story is one of the classics of modern short-story writing.

Cover illustration by Gareth Floyd

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Note to the reader:

The story in this booklet has been specially prepared for intermediate students of English so that it can be read easily without having to use a dictionary often. You will find that difficult words which are important are marked like this: * and these words are explained in a glossary at the end of the booklet. Other words in the story that you do not know are either not very important or have a meaning you can guess quite easily, so you need not stop to use a dictionary.

The story:

In many parts of the modern world, an increasing number of people come to live in big, busy industrial cities. There they hope for many things: better opportunities for education and employment, a fuller social life, freedom from out-dated restrictions, a higher standard of living. Too often they fail to find these, and instead have to endure overcrowding, tedious employment (or unemployment), poor living conditions, an ugly environment, and the sense that society does not care about them.

Life in the big cities is most difficult of all for young adults who need opportunities for developing their increasing social maturity and growing physical powers in positive, healthy and constructive directions. Where these are not available, the so-called 'restlessness' of youth displays itself in various kinds of behaviour, some of them relatively harmless, but others tending towards the types of activity sometimes called 'hooliganism' and 'delinquency'.

It is against such a background that this story unfolds. It has held many generations of readers spell-bound. New readers will enjoy the author's skill in developing his narrative. They may also appreciate the insight he shows into the psychological problems and reactions of young people such as those around whom the story is built.

The author:

William Sansom was born in London in 1912. After education at an English public school, he worked for a time in a bank, then in an advertising agency. Since 1943 he has been a full-time writer, and has produced a considerable number of novels, short stories, travel writings, and also some poems. His works are usually praised for their precision of vision, language, and craftsmanship. His writing shows a special interest in unusual states of mind.

The Vertical Ladder

Flegg felt the palms of his hands becoming moist with sweat as his body seemed to become heavier with every step higher. He regretted in sudden despair the stupid events which had forced him into his present risky climb. But it was now too late. Here he was, alone on a vertical iron ladder, flat against the side of a great gasholder*, and obliged to climb higher and higher until he reached the summit.

Why had he ever allowed himself to begin this? How easy it had been to dismiss all fear while he was still on firm ground. Now he would willingly exchange even his hands that gripped the ladder for a safe return to solid earth.

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It had been a fresh spring day, suddenly as warm as mid-summer. The sun flooded the parks and the streets with sudden heat. Flegg and his friends felt restless in their thick winter clothes. The bright green of the new leaves everywhere was too fierce on the eye; the air seemed almost sticky from the scent of bursting buds*. The girls had complained of headaches, and their thoughts had grown confused and awkward as the woollen under-clothes against their skins. They had wandered out from a park by a back gate into an area of dirty streets.

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The houses there were small and old, some of them already in serious need of repair. The streets were short and rough, with narrow pavements*, and only a few shops such as a tobacconist's or a corner store to relieve the general greyness, — it was the outskirts of some industrial area beyond. At first the quiet, almost deserted streets had seemed more restful than the park. But soon the dusty atmosphere of powdered brick, dark windows, and dry stone steps, — the extreme dryness of everything, had proved even more tiring than before. So, when suddenly they reached the yards of a disused gasworks*, Flegg and his friends had even been glad of the green of the common

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weeds that were growing amongst the old iron-work and broken bricks.

They walked out into the deserted area, the two girls, and Flegg and the other two boys, and soon stood in front of the old gasholder itself. Amongst the ruined sheds it was the only structure still whole: it stood out* amongst 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 with a dull sound. Flegg wished to impress the dark-haired girl, and began to throw his bricks higher than the others. He felt the girl's eyes watching his shoulders, and his shoulders became broader. She had clear black eyes, with short lively eye-lids, as bright as a boy's. Her lips opened attractively over a mouthful of rather irregular teeth, so that it often looked as though she were laughing. Quite often she frowned*, and Flegg liked her earnest expression, always full of purpose. Altogether she seemed a wide-awake girl who would be the first to appreciate an active sort of man. Now she frowned and shouted: 'I bet* you can't climb as high as you can throw!'

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It was one of those awkward jokes, harmless at first, which can become spiteful and even dangerous. The third boy had instantly shouted, 'Of course, he can't. He can't climb no higher* than himself!' Flegg protested that of course he could, and the girl quickly shouted 'Go on then', and pointed upwards, laughing. Already all five of them began to feel the tension.

'Of course he bloody* can't,' repeated the third boy. 'I can climb to the top of anything,' boasted Flegg. 'Climb to the top of the gasworks then,' the girl had said. 'That's nothing,' Flegg answered.

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Then the girl, eager to keep the joke alive, thought of something which changed the idle words into serious action.

'Go on, then; climb it,' she said. 'Here, tie my hanky* on top. Tie my flag* to the top.'

Even then for a second Flegg had a chance to avoid the climb. For a moment he thought that he could laugh it off, but a serious expression had come into the girl's face; she was dancing up and down, clapping her hands in excitement. This disturbed him, and, struggling to find suitable words he began to stutter*. At all costs he had to cover up

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his stuttering, so he had said, 'Off we go then,' and turned towards the gasholder.

It was not, after all, so very high. Its iron top rail was about as high as a five or six storey house. Until then Flegg had only been aware of the gasholder as a mass of rough iron, but now he began to observe the details more closely. He noticed the brown rusted iron sides, with patches of red paint here and there: some parts were flat, not curved, as though it was ready to collapse*. He saw the ladders mounting upwards through a network of girders* and struts*.

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There were two ladders. One was something like a stair-case, climbing up the side of the gasholder in easy stages, with a safety rail. The other, a Jacob's ladder*, was fixed close against the side, and mounted vertically upwards. This was obviously more difficult to climb and appeared to be no longer in use, as about twenty feet of its lower steps had broken away. However, it seemed that there was some painting in progress for a wooden painter's ladder was leaning against the side. Its top just reached the bottom of the vertical ladder so that it was possible to use it for getting to the top.

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Flegg looked quickly, first at the foot of the wooden ladder, to see that it was steady; then, up to the very top of the iron ladder, checking to see if there were any faults in it. All the time he was observing these details, he kept moving forward. For now he had agreed to make the climb, and he must appear at ease and show no hesitation.

The two boys and his own girl, as if to encourage him, kept up a stream of joking remarks:

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'How I climbed Mount Everest*!'

'He'll come down quicker than he went up!'

'Mind you don't bang your head on a harp*!!'

The second girl remained quiet. She was already frightened, as though she felt responsible for some terrible accident which was about to happen, even though she had never opened her mouth.

Suddenly they started shouting again more loudly. For a moment, while inspecting the rest of the gasholder, Flegg's eyes had wandered towards the safer staircase. Almost unconsciously, his footsteps had turned in that direction. Why not use that for his climb? No-one had actually said that he must use the Jacob's ladder. There might yet be a

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chance. But the quick eyes behind him had guessed his thoughts, and at once they shouted:

'No, you don't.'

'Not up them easy stairs*!'

He made a quick change of direction as though he had never intended to avoid the vertical ladder.

'Who's talking about stairs?' he asked. But behind him they still kept shouting, driving him on and worrying him spitefully:

'Look at him. He doesn't know which way to go. Like a duck's uncle without an aunt*.'

By now Flegg realized that there was no escape. He just had to climb the gasholder by the vertical ladder. As soon as he had reached this conclusion, all doubts cleared from him mind. He straightened his shoulders and began to tell himself that it was an easy thing after all. 'It isn't so high,' he thought. 'Why should I worry? Hundreds of men climb such ladders every day. No one falls. The ladders are fixed as safe as houses.' He even began to smile within himself at his earlier fears. Added to this, the girl now ran to him and handed him her handkerchief. Her frowning black eyes smiled at him, and he noticed that she was no longer looking at him in scorn. Her expression had grown softer, and she gave him a look of real encouragement and even admiration.

'Here's your flag,' she said. And then she added:

'I tell you what — You don't really have to go. I'll believe that you can.'

But now it was too late. Flegg had said that he would climb, and was already feeling an exciting 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.

The wooden ladder was leaning against the gasholder at a comfortable angle. However, Flegg had only climbed about ten feet, as high as the top of a first floor window, when he began to slow. He gripped the rungs of the ladder above him more tightly, and placed his feet on the bars below him more cautiously. Although he could not exactly measure his height, he already felt that he was unusually high. There was nothing but air, and a thin structure of wooden bars, between him and the ground. His eyes stared straight ahead at the iron sheeting* just as if he were at ground level, but he was beginning to sense the lack of

solid support. The sensation of height had a strange effect. He had to try very carefully to keep his balance, and every muscle in his body was tense. It was not by any means an unpleasant feeling for he felt a new control of all his movements, like a trained athlete. He climbed on steadily until he reached the head of the ladder and the first of the vertical iron rungs.

Here for a moment Flegg had paused. He rested his knees against the last three rungs of the wooden ladder while he grasped* the two sides of the rusted iron ladder that led so straight upwards. The wood felt warm and motherly: the iron felt cold and gritty*. Some rust flaked off and, as he looked upward, a large piece fell on to his face. He wanted to brush it away from his eyes, but somehow he could not lift his hands away from the iron supports. He tried to get rid of the flake of rust by shaking his head. The movement nearly unbalanced him, and a cold shock ran all through his body. However he forced himself to laugh at the sudden fear, and to some extent his courage returned. He pulled at the sides of the iron ladder to test it, and it seemed as firm as if it had been fixed into solid rock. 10 20

He looked up, following the line of rungs rising up to the skyline*. From this angle, the gasholder looked higher than before. The blue sky seemed to be almost touching it. Its far-away shadowy summit seemed to be leaning over darkly. The gasholder was of course very solid, but from Flegg's position it looked as though the whole thing might suddenly fall over on top of him. He lowered his eyes quickly to fix them on his hands in front of him. He began to climb. 30

From below a few cries from the other boys could be heard. The girl had stopped shouting — she was probably following Flegg's steps with admiring eyes. He pictured her peculiar frown and attractive mouth, and from her image he drew new strength with which he gripped the rungs more eagerly. He noticed that the cries had begun to sound different, as though they were already far off. He could no longer distinguish the words so easily. Up there it was certainly cooler. For the first time that day he felt a slight wind. He looked down. His friends appeared alarmingly small. Their bodies had disappeared, and he saw only their faces looking upwards. He wanted to wave to them to 40

show his confidence, but somehow his hands refused to leave their grip on the ladder. He turned to the rungs again and the smile left his lips.

He swallowed uneasily and continued to climb slowly upwards, hand after hand, foot after foot. It was when he had climbed the first ten rungs of the iron ladder that his hands first began to sweat. All at once with a sudden shock he realized that, beyond all question, he *was* afraid. He could hide it no longer. His hands trembled as he moved them fearfully from one rung to another. His feet moved hesitatingly, and glued themselves desperately* to the iron at every step. His limbs had lost much of their natural rhythm, and his body moved with the awkward movements of a cripple*.

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By now he was thirty feet above the ground. Although his hands and feet were firmly holding on to the ladder, his body seemed to be hanging in space. He felt rather like a fly on a wall against the laws of nature*. For the first time, as fear took hold of him, he felt that the climb was impossible. He would never reach the top. If he felt afraid at the height of thirty feet, what would he feel at sixty? Yet, — he continued slowly to climb. He was afraid, but he would not give up. His fear increased at every step, but he forced himself to think that it would soon be over.

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A sudden memory flashed into his mind. His eyes were still fixed on the rusty iron bars and on his white strained hands, but for an instant his mind went back to an occasion in his childhood. He had woken up one night and seen a great white light coming in at the window. He had crawled out of bed and climbed on to a chair that stood beneath the window. Outside it seemed that there was nothing but empty space. Soon he noticed that, stretching as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but a huge plain of water. All the houses and other buildings had disappeared. The water washed against the side of the house. It moved strangely in the moonlight, as though there were great mysterious beasts below its calm surface. The water attracted him, and he felt that he must jump from the window and sink his head slowly beneath it. But he was too high and could only look down helplessly. He had been deeply frightened at the great emptiness, the sky and the water, and the lonely stone walls of the house. Then a battleship had sailed by. He had woken up — for it

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was only a dream, and the battleship had saved him from his terror. Now on the ladder he had a sudden hope that something as large and solid would come again to help him.

Ten rungs further up he began to sweat more violently than ever. His hands were covered with wet rust. Another flake of rust fell on his forehead, and this time it stuck in the wetness. Fear was draining his strength, just when his dangerous position needed extra physical effort. At each step upward his body weighed more heavily and hung from his arms like a sack of lead. Every muscle ached. His legs no longer gave enough support and seemed to need their remaining strength just to keep close to the ladder. The wind blew more strongly. It dragged at his coat, it blew at him from all sides, and made him feel more lonely than ever. 'Don't look down,' the blood whispered in his forehead. 'Don't look down. For God's sake, don't look down.'

By the time he was three-quarters of the way up the gasholder, and fifty feet from the ground, Flegg began to grow desperate. All other thoughts suddenly went from him. He wanted only to reach the ground as quickly as possible. Nothing else mattered. He stopped climbing and held to the ladder, breathing rapidly. Very carefully, so that he could raise his eyes quickly if he saw anything unpleasant, he looked down. He looked down, past his shoulder, past his waist, — and then to the ground below. He looked up quickly again.

He pressed himself close to the ladder. Tears sprang into his eyes. For a moment they became red with giddiness*. He closed them shutting everything out of sight. Then quickly he opened them, afraid that he might miss some vital detail. He felt that he must watch his hands, he must watch the bars, he must watch the rusted iron sheeting of the gasholder itself. No movement must escape him: the ladder might become loose, the whole structure might fall over. His brain told him that the gasholder had been there for years and was still as steady as a rock. His fevered imagination suspected that this could be just the moment when at last the wind would blow too strongly, a strut would break, and the whole thing would crash to the ground. The picture became so clear in his mind that he could actually see the sheets of iron bending and folding

up like a piece of cloth as the huge weight sank to the earth.

The ground was now very far away, and the drop was fearful. From below, the height he had reached would not seem unusual, but looking down the distance seemed to be double. All the familiar things, — his friends, the lamp-posts, a brick wall, the foot path, a drain, — all these had grown extremely small. On the other hand, the world of chimneys, attics* and rooftops had become alarmingly large. Even the iron sheeting that stretched out on each side of him seemed to have grown larger. In comparison he felt small and helpless like a child lost on a huge desert of red dust.

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All these unusual sensations upset his nerves more than the danger of falling. It was the feeling of loneliness that was most terrible. Everything seemed completely strange. Curiously, up there, alone on the iron spaces, with the endless winds blowing all around him, and among so many free things, he felt himself shut in! Trembling and breathless, he took the first step downward . . .

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A sudden burst of shouting broke out below. Above it all he could hear the single voice of the girl who had so far been quiet. She was screaming, and her voice came up like that of a wild bird. 'Put it back, put it back,' she seemed to be shouting. Flegg, thinking that their cries were to warn him of some new danger which he could not see, gripped the ladder tightly, and looked down again. He glanced down for only part of a second, but in that short time he saw enough. The quiet girl who was screaming was pointing to the bottom of the iron ladder. He saw the others crowding round her waving their arms wildly. She really had been shouting, 'Put it back.' He realized now what the words meant: someone had taken away the painter's ladder!

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It lay full length on the ground, white like a child's drawing of a ladder. The boys had probably seen him take his first step downward and then, either in fun or in spite, they had removed his only link with safety. He remembered that it was a twenty-foot drop from the bottom of the iron ladder to the ground. He wondered whether he should quickly climb down and appeal to them to put it back. Then he imagined how they would argue and joke with him for precious minutes, while all the time his strength

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was draining away. Since the quiet girl had begun to scream, the boys seemed to be driving her away. She had been terrified by the removal of the ladder. Her screams, however, defeated their purpose, for the others seemed to enjoy making her scream, and had forgotten about Flegg far above them. They seemed to be moving further away, quite regardless of his helpless position up there on his wide prison of rust. His heart cried out for them to stay. He forgot their scorn, and felt only a great pity for himself. A lump came into his throat* and his eyes began to fill with tears.

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There was nothing that he could do. They did not even know that he was in difficulties. There was nothing for it but to go on climbing. He tried to shake off his fear, and actually shook his head. He stared hard at the rungs in front of his eyes and tried to imagine that he was not high up at all. He lifted himself slowly by one rung, and then by another, and gradually dragged himself higher and higher. At length, he must have reached about ten rungs from the top, the height of a five storey house, with only the distance of one more storey to climb. He knew that he was approaching the summit platform, and, to measure the remaining distance, looked up.

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He looked up, and from what he saw he felt a new terror, much greater than before. He almost let go of the ladder. His senses screamed at him to let go, but his hands refused to open. His fingers were gripping the rungs of the ladder like hooks of dried bone, but he had no control over them and at any moment they might open and allow him to drop. His feet were too cold to feel anything. The sweat running down his body made him sick. His trousers ran wet. He trembled and felt even more giddy. He just managed to hang on to the ladder in absolute despair.

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The sight of the top of the gasholder had proved even more terrible than the thought of the drop beneath. It was not so much from the sense of danger or the risk of falling, but because of the absolute loneliness. It was entirely removed from all living things. It was something like the eye-piece of an ancient earth God* looking up into the sky, or the great cliffs that stand at the end of the northern world. It seemed immensely old, washed only by the highest storms, beaten by the winds, and had nothing to do with the human world.

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Now near to the summit, Flegg realized the full height of his climb. The skyline, so close, made him aware of the great empty space below. He pictured a man falling through it, arms and legs wildly clutching*, to smash into the stones below like a railway engine crashing into a cliff. While the man was twisting and turning in the air, his thoughts raced ahead to the awful moment of his crash.

Flegg held tightly to the rusty ladder, and made small crying noises with his mouth. Still trembling, he began to climb up again, his knees and elbows spread sideways like a frog so that his body was always as close as possible to the ladder. Was it still firm? He began to hurry, using up his last strength to cover the few remaining steps. He was whispering urgent but meaningless words to himself as one sometimes does in a bad dream. A huge weight seemed to be pulling him down, but still he climbed higher. 10

He reached the top-most rung — and found himself staring at a wall of red rust. He looked again, wild with a new terror. It *was* the top rung. The ladder had ended. But there was no platform. The real top rungs were missing. The platform was still about five feet higher, and quite out of reach. Flegg was silent, moving his head from side to side like a lost animal. Then he jammed his legs in the lower rungs and his arms up to the shoulder in the top rungs, and there he hung shivering*, unable to think what more he could ever do . . . 20

Glossary

Many words have more than one meaning. The meanings given here refer to the sentence in the story in which the word appears.

page 1

line 6	gasholder	a large metal container used to store coal gas
19	buds	swellings on growing plants, from which new leaves develop
26	pavements	an area alongside a road for use by people on foot
34	gasworks	the factory where coal gas is manufactured by heating coal

page 2

line 6	stood out	appeared very obvious
17	frown	to draw the eyebrows together
20	bet	to risk something (usually money) on something doubtful: an expression used by young people when boasting or daring each other
25	He can't climb no higher . . .	He can't climb <i>any</i> higher
29	bloody	a word (sometimes thought to be vulgar) often used in colloquial speech to add emphasis
36	hanky	colloquial abbreviation of handkerchief
37	flag	the girl means that if Flegg takes her handkerchief to the top he will be her hero
43	stutter	to be unable to speak clearly, usually a sign of nervousness

page 3

line 9	collapse	to fall into pieces
10	girder(s)	iron beam used for supporting something
11	strut(s)	piece of wood or iron inserted in a structure to bear weight
14	Jacob's ladder	a ladder, sometimes made of wood and rope, which hangs vertically
31	Mount Everest	the highest mountain in the world, very difficult to climb
33	harp	stringed musical instrument, supposed to be played by angels in heaven

page 4

line 4	them easy stairs	those easy stairs. The boy's expression is grammatically incorrect
11	Like a duck's uncle . . .	a humorous colloquial phrase
31	dramatic	Flegg at this moment pictures himself as the hero of a film or play
32	rungs	a step on a ladder
42	sheeting	large flat pieces (of metal in this case)

page 5

line 10	grasp	to take hold of firmly
12	gritty	covered with small hard particles
24	skyline	where the sky meets the earth

page 6

line 11	desperately	in despair, without hope
14	cripple	a person whose body is not properly formed
18	laws of nature	in this case, that all things fall downwards

page 7

line 30	giddiness	a readiness to fall, e.g. after being rapidly spun round
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page 8

line 9 attic

a small room in the roof of a house

page 9

line 10 lump . . .
throat

being unable to swallow

39 eye-piece . . .
God

in his imagination Flegg thinks of the gasholder as the projecting eye of a God

page 10

line 4 clutching
25 shivering

trying desperately to hold
the body shaking rapidly with fear or
cold

