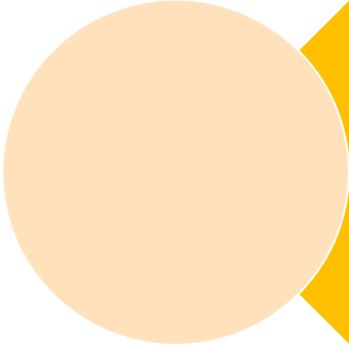


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# THE VERTICAL LADDER

- WILLIAM SANSOM

- **William Sansom**, (born Jan. 18, 1912, London—died April 20, 1976, [London](#)), writer of short stories, novels, and travel books who is considered particularly [acute](#) in his dissections of London life and scenes.
- Educated at Uppingham School, [Rutland](#), Sansom worked in banking and advertising until [World War II](#). After writing some film scripts following the war, he became a full-time writer.



His most important novels are *The Body* (1949), *A Bed of Roses* (1954), *The Loving Eye* (1956), and *Goodbye* (1966). His short stories have been collected in *Fireman Flower* (1944), *Something Terrible*, *Something Lovely* (1948), *A Touch of the Sun* (1952), *Blue Skies*, *Brown Studies* (1960), and *The Marmalade Bird* (1973), containing “Down at the Hydro,” one of his best stories. He also wrote travel books about his European trips and a biography of [Marcel Proust](#), *Proust and His World* (1973)

# SUMMARY

- The group of three boys and two girls are probably teenagers because they are apparently old enough to be given considerable freedom, yet young enough to have little sense of responsibility.
- They have walked out the back gate of a public park into a run-down, almost deserted section of town, wandered on to the abandoned gasworks, and started throwing bricks at the rusty iron gasometer, towering above all the other structures.
- The [protagonist](#) is showing off, casting his bricks higher than the others, claiming that he knows something about throwing grenades. Then comes the shout from one of the girls: “Bet you can’t climb as high as you can throw!”

- A young man named Flegg, responding to a dare by a girl he wants to impress and the taunting of a group of young acquaintances, attempts to climb a vertical ladder on an old gasometer, a storage tower in a deserted gasworks.
- The playful psychological game quickly pushes Flegg into a position of bravado from which he cannot gracefully retreat without losing face.
- There are two ways of ascent, one known as a Jacob's ladder, bolted flat against the side of the tower, the other a zigzag staircase with a safety railing. Flegg saunters toward the safer stair, but the boys call him a sissy and insist that he climb the vertical ladder.
- The ladder looks solid enough except that some twenty feet of the lower rungs are missing. A wooden painter's ladder is propped up against the vertical ladder, however, making it perfectly accessible.

- One of the girls, no longer vicious but actually encouraging and admiring, gives him her handkerchief to plant at the top of the tower like a banner.
- He starts off jauntily enough, practically running up the wooden ladder but slowing significantly when he reaches the vertical ascent. Flakes of rust drop in his face, and he finds that he cannot remove a hand long enough to brush them off.
- As he felt the first watery eggs of sweat moistening the palms of his hands, as with every rung higher his body seemed to weigh more heavily, Flegg regretted in sudden desperation but still in vain, the irresponsible events that had thrust him 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?
- While the boy was climbing, the children laughed at him, and Flegg was struggling with his fear. When the boys saw Flegg doing his first step downstairs, they removed the wooden ladder which had connected the iron one to the ground.
- Among Flegg's friends was the girl, who cried and asked him to put back. But the other children wandered her away. When Flegg was very close to the top of the ladder, he saw, that the top rungs were missing. He hung from the ladder and didn't know what to do anymore.
- This story touches on essential problems such as problem of mate's influence, problem of difficulties being a teenager, problem of choice.



*Thank you*