

The Lift

By A. Conan Doyle

Flight-Commander Stangate should have been happy. He had come safely through the war without a hurt, and with a good name in the most heroic of services. He had only just turned thirty, and a great career seemed to lie ahead of him. Above all, beautiful Mary MacLean was walking by his side, and he had her promise that she was there for life. What could a young man ask for more? And yet there was a heavy load upon his heart.

He could not explain it himself, and endeavoured to reason himself out of it. There was the blue sky above him, the blue sea in front, the beautiful gardens with their throngs of happy pleasure-seekers around. Above all, there was that sweet face turned upon him with questioning concern. Why could he not raise himself to so joyful an environment? He made effort after effort, but they were not convincing enough to deceive the quick instinct of a loving woman.

“What is it, Tom?” she asked anxiously. “I can see that something is clouding you. Do tell me if I can help you in any way.”

He laughed in shame-faced fashion.

“It is such a sin to spoil our little outing,” he said. “I could kick myself round these gardens when I think of it. Don’t worry, my darling, for I know the cloud will roll off. I suppose I am a creature of nerves, though I should have got past that by now. The Flying Service is supposed either to break you or to warrant you for life.”

“It is nothing definite, then?”

“No, it is nothing definite. That’s the worst of it. You could fight it more easily if it was. It’s just a dead, heavy depression here in my chest and across my forehead. But do forgive me, dear girl! What a brute I am to shadow you like this.”

“But I love to share even the smallest trouble.”

“Well, it’s gone—vamosed—vanished. We will talk about it no more.

She gave him a swift, penetrating glance.

“No, no, Tom; your brow shows, as well as feels. Tell me, dear, have you often felt like this? You really look very ill. Sit here, dear, in the shade and tell me of it.”

They sat together in the shadow of the great latticed Tower which reared itself six hundred feet high beside them.

“I have an absurd faculty,” said he; “I don’t know that I have ever mentioned it to any one before. But when imminent danger is threatening me I get these strange forebodings. Of course it is absurd to-day in these peaceful surroundings. It only shows how queerly these things work. But it is the first time that it has deceived me.”

“When had you it before?”

“When I was a lad it seized me one morning. I was nearly drowned that afternoon. I had it when the burglar came to Morton Hall and I got a bullet through my coat. Then twice in the war when I was overmatched and escaped by a miracle, I had this strange feeling before ever I climbed into my machine. Then it lifts quite suddenly, like a mist in the sunshine. Why, it is lifting now. Look at me! Can’t you see that it is so?”

She could indeed. He had turned in a minute from a haggard man to a laughing boy. She found herself laughing in sympathy. A rush of high spirits and energy had swept away his strange foreboding and filled his whole soul with the vivid, dancing joy of youth.

“Thank goodness!” he cried. “I think it is your dear eyes that have done it. I could not stand that wistful look in them. What a silly, foolish nightmare it all has been! There’s an end for ever in my belief in presentiments. Now, dear girl, we have just time for one good turn before luncheon. After that the gardens get so crowded that it is hopeless to do anything. Shall we have a side show, or the great wheel, or the flying boat, or what?”

“What about the Tower?” she asked, glancing upwards. “Surely that glorious air and the view from the top would drive the last wisps of cloud out of your mind.”

He looked at his watch.

“Well, it’s past twelve, but I suppose we could do it all in an hour. But it doesn’t seem to be working. What about it, conductor?”

The man shook his head and pointed to a little knot of people who were assembled at the entrance.

“They’ve all been waiting, sir. It’s hung up, but the gear is being overhauled, and I expect the signal every minute. If you join the others I promise it won’t be long.”

They had hardly reached the group when the steel face of the lift rolled aside—a sign that there was hope in the future. The motley crowd drifted through the opening and waited expectantly upon the wooden platform. They were not numerous, for the gardens are not crowded until the afternoon, but they were fair samples of the kindly, good-humoured north-country folk who take their annual holiday at Northam. Their faces were all upturned now, and they were watching with keen interest a man who was descending the steel framework. It seemed a dangerous, precarious business, but he came as swiftly as an ordinary mortal upon a staircase.

“My word!” said the conductor, glancing up. “Jim has got a move on this morning.”

“Who is he?” asked Commander Stangate.

“That’s Jim Barnes, sir, the best workman that ever went on a scaffold. He fair lives up there: Every bolt and rivet are under his care. He’s a wonder, is Jim.”

“But don’t argue religion with him,” said one of the group.

The attendant laughed.

“Ah, you know him, then,” said he. “No, don’t argue religion with him.”

“Why not?” asked the officer.

“Well, he takes it very hard, he does. He’s the shining light of his sect.”

“It ain’t hard to be that,” said the knowing one. “I’ve heard there are only six folk in the fold. He’s one of those who picture heaven as the exact size of their own back street conventicle and every one else left outside it.”

“Better not tell him so while he’s got that hammer in his hand,” said the conductor, in a hurried whisper. “Hallo, Jim, how goes it this morning?”

The man slid swiftly down the last thirty feet, and then balanced himself on a cross-bar while he looked at the little group in the lift. As he stood there, clad in a leather suit, with his pliers and other tools dangling from his brown belt, he was a figure to please the eye of an artist. The man was very tall and gaunt, with great straggling limbs and every appearance of giant strength. His face was a remarkable one, noble and yet sinister, with dark eyes and hair, a prominent hooked nose, and a beard which flowed over his chest. He steadied himself with one knotted hand, while the other held a steel hammer dangling by his knee.

“It’s all ready aloft,” said he. “I’ll go up with you if I may.” He sprang down from his perch and joined the others in the lift.

“I suppose you are always watching it,” said the young lady.

“That is what I am engaged for, miss. From morning to night, and often from night to morning, I am up here. There are times when I feel as if I were not a man at all, but a fowl of the air. They fly round me, the creatures, as I lie out on the girders, and they cry to me until I find myself crying back to the poor soulless things.”

“It’s a great charge,” said the Commander, glancing up at the wonderful tracery of steel outlined against the deep blue sky.

“Aye, sir, and there is not a nut nor a screw that is not in my keeping. Here’s my hammer to ring them true and my spanner to wrench them tight. As the Lord over the earth, so am I—even I—over the Tower, with power of life and power of death, aye of death and of life.”

The hydraulic machinery had begun to work and the lift very slowly ascended. As it mounted, the glorious panorama of the coast and bay gradually unfolded itself. So engrossing was the view that the passengers hardly noticed it when the platform stopped abruptly between stages at the five hundred foot level. Barnes, the workman, muttered that something must be amiss, and springing like a cat across the gap which separated them from the trellis-work of metal he clambered out of sight. The motley little party, suspended in mid-air, lost something of their British shyness under such unwonted conditions and began to compare notes with each other. One couple, who addressed each other as Dolly and Billy, announced to the company that they were the particular star’s of the Hippodrome bill, and kept their neighbours tittering with their rather obvious wit. A buxom mother, her precocious son, and two married couples upon holiday formed an appreciative audience.

“You’d like to be a sailor, would you?” said Billy the comedian, in answer to some remark of the boy. “Look ’ere, my nipper, you’ll end up as a blooming corpse if you ain’t careful. See ’im standin’ at the edge. At this hour of the morning I can’t bear to watch it.”

“What’s the hour got to do with it?” asked a stout commercial traveller.

“My nerves are worth nothin’ before midday. Why, lookin’ down there, and seem’ those folks like dots, puts me all in a twitter. My family is all alike in the mornin’.”

“I expect,” said Dolly, a high-coloured young woman, “that they’re all alike the evening before.”

There was a general laugh, which was led by the comedian.

“You got it across that time, Dolly. It’s K.O. for Battling Billy—still senseless when last heard of. If my family is laughed at I’ll leave the room.”

“It’s about time we did,” said the commercial traveller, who was a red-faced, choleric person. “It’s a disgrace the way they hold us up. I’ll write to the company.”

“Where’s the bell-push?” said Billy. “I’m goin’ to ring.”

“What for—the waiter?” asked the lady.

“For the conductor, the chauffeur, whoever it is that drives the old bus up and down. Have they run out of petrol, or broke the mainspring, or what?”

“We have a fine view, anyhow,” said the Commander.

“Well, I’ve had that,” remarked Billy. “I’m done with it, and I’m for getting on.”

“I’m getting nervous,” cried the stout mother. “I do hope there is nothing wrong with the lift.”

“I say, hold on to the slack of my coat, Dolly. I’m going to look over and chance it. Oh, Lord, it makes me sick and giddy! There’s a horse down under, and it ain’t bigger than a mouse. I don’t see any one lookin’ after us. Where’s old Isaiah the prophet who came up with us?”

“He shinned out of it mighty quick when he thought trouble was coming.”

“Look here,” said Dolly, looking very perturbed, “this is a nice thing, I don’t think. Here we are five hundred foot up, and stuck for the day as like as not. I’m due for the *matinée* at the

Hippodrome. I'm sorry for the company if they don't get me down in time for that. I'm billed all over the town for a new song.

"A new one! What's that, Dolly?"

"A real pot o' ginger, I tell you. It's called 'On the Road to Ascot.' I've got a hat four foot across to sing it in."

"Come on, Dolly, let's have a rehearsal while we wait."

"No, no; the young lady here wouldn't understand."

"I'd be very glad to hear it," cried Mary MacLean. "Please don't let me prevent you."

"The words were written to the hat. I couldn't sing the verses without the hat. But there's a nailin' good chorus to it:

" 'If you want a little mascot
When you're on the way to Ascot,
Try the lady with the cartwheel hat.' "

She had a tuneful voice and a sense of rhythm which set every one nodding. "Try it now all together," she cried; and the strange little haphazard company sang it with all their lungs.

"I say," said Billy, "that ought to wake somebody up. What? Let's try a shout all together."

It was a fine effort, but there was no response. It was clear that the management down below was quite ignorant or impotent. No sound came back to them.

The passengers became alarmed. The commercial traveller was rather less rubicund. Billy still tried to joke, but his efforts were not well received. The officer in his blue uniform at once took his place as rightful leader in a crisis. They all looked to him and appealed to him.

"What would you advise, sir? You don't think there's any danger of it coming down, do you?"

"Not the least. But it's awkward to be stuck here all the same. I think I could jump across on to that girder. Then perhaps I could see what is wrong."

"No, no, Tom; for goodness' sake, don't leave us

"Some people have a nerve," said Billy. "Fancy jumping across a five-hundred-foot drop!"

"I dare say the gentleman did worse things in the war.

"Well, I wouldn't do it myself—not if they starred me in the bills. It's all very well for old Isaiah. It's his job, and I wouldn't do him out of it."

Three sides of the lift were shut in with wooden partitions, pierced with windows for the view. The fourth side, facing the sea, was clear. Stangate leaned as far as he could and looked upwards. As he did so there came from above him a peculiar sonorous metallic twang, as if a mighty harp-string had been struck. Some distance up—a hundred feet, perhaps—he could see a long brown corded arm, which was working furiously among the wire cordage above. The form was beyond his view, but he was fascinated by this bare sinewy arm which tugged and pulled and sagged and stabbed.

"It's all right," he said, and a general sigh of relief broke from his strange comrades at his words. "There is some one above us setting things right."

"It's old Isaiah," said Billy, stretching his neck round the corner. "I can't see him, but it's his arm for a dollar. What's he got in his hand? Looks like a screwdriver or something. No, by George, it's a file."

As he spoke there came another sonorous twang from above. There was a troubled frown upon the officer's brow.

“I say, dash it all, that’s the very sound our steel hawser made when it parted, strand by strand, at Dixmude. What the deuce is the fellow about? Hey, there! what are you trying to do?”

The man had ceased his work and was now slowly descending the iron trellis.

“All right, he’s coming,” said Stangate to his startled companions. “It’s all right, Mary. Don’t be frightened, any of you. It’s absurd to suppose he would really weaken the cord that holds us.”

A pair of high boots appeared from above. Then came the leathern breeches, the belt with its dangling tools, the muscular form, and, finally, the fierce, swarthy, eagle face of the workman. His coat was off and his shirt open, showing the hairy chest. As he appeared there came another sharp snapping vibration from above. The man made his way down in leisurely fashion, and then, balancing himself upon the cross-girder and leaning against the side piece, he stood with folded arms, looking from under his heavy black brows at the huddled passengers upon the platform.

“Hallo!” said Stangate. “What’s the matter?”

The man stood impassive and silent, with something indescribably menacing in his fixed, unwinking stare.

The flying officer grew angry.

“Hallo! Are you deaf?” he cried. “How long do you mean to have us stuck here?”

The man stood silent. There was something devilish in his appearance.

“I’ll complain of you, my lad,” said Billy, in a quivering voice. “This won’t stop here, I can promise you.”

“Look here!” cried the officer. “We have ladies here and you are alarming them. Why are we stuck here? Has the machinery gone wrong?”

“You are here,” said the man, “because I have put a wedge against the hawser above you.

“You fouled the line! How dared you do such a thing! What right have you to frighten the women and put us all to this inconvenience? Take that wedge out this instant, or it will be the worse for you.”

The man was silent.

“Do you hear what I say? Why the devil don’t you answer? Is this a joke or what? We’ve had about enough of it, I tell you.”

Mary MacLean had gripped her lover by the arm in an agony of sudden panic.

“Oh, Tom!” she cried. “Look at his eyes—look at his horrible eyes! The man is a maniac.”

The workman stirred suddenly into sinister life. His dark face broke into writhing lines of passion, and his fierce eyes glowed like embers, while he shook one long arm in the air.

“Behold,” he cried, “those who are mad to the children of this world are in very truth the Lord’s anointed and the dwellers in the inner temple. Lo, I am one who is prepared to testify even to the uttermost, for of a verity the day has now come when the humble will be exalted and the wicked will be cut off in their sins!”

“Mother! Mother!” cried the little boy, in terror.

“There, there! It’s all right, Jack,” said the buxom woman, and then, in a burst of womanly wrath, “What d’you want to make the child cry for? You’re a pretty man, you are!”

“Better he should cry now than in the outer darkness. Let him seek safety while there is yet time.”

The officer measured the gap with a practised eye. It was a good eight feet across, and the fellow could push him over before he could steady himself. It would be a desperate thing to attempt. He tried soothing words once more.

“See here, my lad, you’ve carried this joke too far. Why should you wish to injure us? Just shin up and get that wedge out, and we will agree to say no more about it.”

Another rending snap came from above.

“By George, the hawser is going!” cried Stangate. “Here! Stand aside! I’m coming over to see to it.”

The workman had plucked the hammer from his belt, and waved it furiously in the air.

“Stand back, young man! Stand back! Or come—if you would hasten your end.”

“Tom, Tom, for God’s sake, don’t spring! Help! Help!”

The passengers all joined in the cry for aid. The man smiled malignantly as he watched them.

“There is no one to help. They could not come if they would. You would be wiser to turn to your own souls that ye be not cast to the burning. Lo, strand by strand the cable snaps which holds you. There is yet another, and with each that goes there is more strain upon the rest. Five minutes of time, and all eternity beyond.”

A moan of fear rose from the prisoners in the lift. Stangate felt a cold sweat upon his brow as he passed his arm round the shrinking girl. If this vindictive devil could only be coaxed away for an instant he would spring across and take his chance in a hand-to-hand fight.

“Look here, my friend! We give you best!” he cried. “We can do nothing. Go up and cut the cable if you wish. Go on—do it now, and get it over!”

“That you may come across unharmed. Having set my hand to the work, I will not draw back from it.”

Fury seized the young officer.

“You devil!” he cried. “What do you stand there grinning for? I’ll give you something to grin about. Give me a stick, one of you.”

The man waved his hammer.

“Come, then! Come to judgment!” he howled.

“He’ll murder you, Tom! Oh, for God’s sake, don’t! If we must die, let us die together.”

“I wouldn’t try it, sir,” cried Billy. “He’ll strike you down before you get a footing. Hold up, Dolly, my dear! Faintin’ won’t help us. You speak to him, miss. Maybe he’ll listen to you.

“Why should you wish to hurt us?” said Mary. “What have we ever done to you? Surely you will be sorry afterwards if we are injured. Now do be kind and reasonable and help us to get back to the ground.”

For a moment there may have been some softening in the man’s fierce eyes as he looked at the sweet face which was upturned to him. Then his features set once more into their grim lines of malice.

“My hand is set to the work, woman. It is not for the servant to look back from his task.”

“But why should this be your task?”

“Because there is a voice within me which tells me so. In the night-time I have heard it, and in the daytime too, when I have lain out alone upon the girders and seen the wicked dotting the streets beneath me, each busy on his own evil intent. ‘John Barnes, John Barnes,’ said the voice. ‘You are here that you may give a sign to a sinful generation—such a sign as shall show them that the Lord liveth and that there is a judgment upon sin.’ Who am I that I should disobey the voice of the Lord?”

“The voice of the devil,” said Stangate. “What is the sin of this lady, or of these others, that you should seek their lives?”

“You are as the others, neither better nor worse. All day they pass me, load by load, with foolish cries and empty songs and vain babble of voices. Their thoughts are set upon the things

of the flesh. Too long have I stood aside and watched and refused to testify. But now the day of wrath is come and the sacrifice is ready. Think not that a woman's tongue can turn me from my task."

"It is useless!" Mary cried. "Useless! I read death in his eyes."

Another cord had snapped.

"Repent! Repent!" cried the madman. "One more, and it is over!"

Commander Stangate felt as if it were all some extraordinary dream—some monstrous nightmare. Could it be possible that he, after all his escapes of death in warfare, was now, in the heart of peaceful England, at the mercy of a homicidal lunatic, and that his dear girl, the one being whom he would shield from the very shadow of danger, was helpless before this horrible man? All his energy and manhood rose up in him for one last effort.

"Here, we won't be killed like sheep in the shambles!" he cried, throwing himself against the wooden wall of the lift and kicking with all his force. "Come on, boys! Kick it! Beat it! It's only match-boarding, and it is giving. Smash it down! Well done! Once more all together! There she goes! Now for the side! Out with it! Splendid!"

First the back and then the side of the little compartment had been knocked out, and the splinters dropped down into the abyss. Barnes danced upon his girder, his hammer in the air.

"Strive not!" he shrieked. "It avails not. The day is surely come."

"It's not two feet from the side girder," cried the officer. "Get across! Quick! Quick! All of you. I'll hold this devil off!" He had seized a stout stick from the commercial traveller and faced the madman, daring him to spring across.

"Your turn now, my friend!" he hissed. "Come on, hammer and all! I'm ready for you."

Above him he heard another snap, and the frail platform began to rock. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that his companions were all safe upon the side girder. A strange line of terrified castaways they appeared as they clung in an ungainly row to the trellis-work of steel. But their feet were on the iron support. With two quick steps and a spring he was at their side. At the same instant the murderer, hammer in hand, jumped the gap. They had one vision of him there—a vision which will haunt their dreams—the convulsed face, the blazing eyes, the wind-tossed raven locks. For a moment he balanced himself upon the swaying platform. The next, with a rending crash, he and it were gone. There was a long silence and then, far down, the thud and clatter of a mighty fall.

With white faces, the forlorn group clung to the cold steel bars and gazed down into the terrible abyss.

It was the Commander who broke the silence.

"They'll send for us now. It's all safe," he cried, wiping his brow. "But, by Jove, it was a close call!"