

COLD HANDS

It was quite a number of years ago that one cold spring day I chanced to meet an old college chum of mine on the streets of Indianapolis. His name was Alfred Noyes and he had been a senior in Civil Engineering when I was just a freshman. We retreated to a bar to talk over old times and finally got around to the question of who was doing what. I found that Al, since graduating, had been employed by Tri-States Construction Company as a steeplejack and was in love with his job. I might have expected that of a daredevil like Al. We used to get him to tack decorations up on the sixty-foot-high ceiling at the dance hall at school. During our talk I foolishly remarked that I could imagine no nicer sport than climbing up tall bridges and the like, and Al, mistaking my idle talk for a genuine interest, asked me to accompany him up an old water tower the following day as he had to make some sort of estimate for repairs to the steel work. It was too late for me to back down so I agreed to go along.

The next morning we drove out to the spot. The tower was one of the oldest I had ever seen. The stand was a combination of wood beams and steel latticework, while the container, itself, was made of tile and brick. He pointed up to the scaffold, the top of which looked like a few matches, and told me that it was one hundred and eighty feet from the ground.

"And that crack you see running about half way down the bricks," he said, "was caused by frost. This tower hasn't been used for some years and about one more winter and it would all be down. Well, you're first."

I took a grip on the ladder and shook it. It wiggled a little, but I gave Al a weak smile, turned to face the rungs, and started to climb rather rapidly. About the time I was level with the warehouse to my left I paused for breath. I looked down the ladder which looked more like a swaying rope as it tapered to the ground below me, but Al hadn't started yet. I decided not to look down again so I looked up and that was also a mistake. The top seemed as far away as ever. I dared not turn back so I started to climb again, a little slower this time. I cursed myself for leaving my gloves and coat

below for the wind was bitterly cold up above and my hands were beginning to feel like lumps of cold putty. I kept looking at the rungs and after a time my back and legs began to ache and once I felt dizzy, but kept on going. At last I came to the scaffold which extended over the ladder. I reached up and around the single plank, one hand at a time, and for a minute my legs hung limply in space. I rolled over, breathless, on the plank. Al was right behind me.

"Well," he said, "how do you like the view?"

I straddled the plank, locked my ankles together, and looked down at the little box that was the warehouse and at the little ants and beetles that were the people and the shiny cars. It wasn't dizziness I felt . . . more like that weak feeling after an inoculation. Al was busily taking measurements and did not appear to notice my paling face. Every step he took the plank rose and fell like a diving board. I think it was about then that I knew that if I looked down once more, I would fall.

At last Al pocketed his tape and told me to go first. As I hung from the plank once again, the wind whipped some brick-dust into my eyes, my grip momentarily loosened, and I grabbed wildly for something solid. My unfeeling hands took hold of a thin piece of strap iron which slowly began to bend until one of the rusted ends snapped from its bolt. At that same moment my feet found the ladder and, as I swayed on my arches, I seized the top rung with my hands. I started down, step by step.

Once my feet slipped and I wondered how my hands held me. I think they must have been frozen into hooks and they wouldn't any more have opened than they would close. But they held. I paused to rest and the ground seemed closer. Numbed with cold and fear, I kept stepping down like some mechanical doll on a string. The climb down seemed to take so long that when I reached the ground at last, I hit it with quite a jar.

Even today, when I sit down after skating and try to make my cold hands undo the knot in my laces, I think of that water tower and feel a little colder.

—By LELAND M. READ.