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# Weird Tales

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September  
1953

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Cover by JON ARFSTROM

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Published bi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. W. J. Delaney, President & Treasurer, E. M. Cogan, Secretary. Reentered as second-class matter January 24, 1940, at the Post Office, New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. *Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions \$2.00; two years \$3.50. Canadian: one year \$2.25; two years, \$4.00. Foreign: one year \$2.30; two years, \$4.10. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts.*

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Printed in U. S. A.

Vol. 45, No. 4

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

*Pinkerton Fly, standing on nothing and looking down on me as he asked for a job. . . .*

# the man who walked on air



by Michael Avallone

LET me tell you about the man who walked on air. John Henry could have told you but John Henry is dead. That leaves just me. You've heard of me. Lester Borne, the great American showman. Of course, someone else could have told you too. The man who walked on air had a wife—

But I'm getting ahead of a story that really began one day in my office. Tomlin's Three-Ring Circus was in town and I, Lester Borne, its manager and sole owner, was thinking rather regretfully of how little I had to offer a public that ate peanuts and adored death-defying thrills.

Certainly, I had clowns, bare-

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Heading by W. H. Silvey

back riders and a whole ring full of wild animal acts. Even the Benzo Brothers who gleefully and fearlessly submitted to being shot from the cannon's mouth once every performance at quite a chunk of dough per season. But nothing really new. Or different. Possibly, this explains my willingness to see the man whose card preceded him into my Fifth Avenue office.

It was quite a strange card:

PINKERTON FLY

THE MAN WHO WALKS ON AIR  
NO ROPES NO NETS NO WIRES

When my secretary ushered him in, I was skeptical. He was a small, undersized man. A sallow complexion, skimpy build, and a curious attitude of listening in the way he cocked his angular, almost bald head. He didn't look anything at all the way a Big Tent performer should look.

I wasted no time with the usual preambles. I'd been consoling myself with Martinis and wondered later if this had anything to do with what I was about to see.

"Show me," I scoffed.

He did.

Without comment, he performed one of those things Nijinsky was so famous for. I don't know what they call it, but Pinkerton Fly sprang high into the

air, crossed his feet about fifteen times with small, scissor-kicks—and here he went the great Russian ballet artist one better. He *stayed* up there. He didn't come *down*. Just stood there and stared down at me intently, looking for all the world as if he were standing on the floor.

I blinked at him. He regarded me with that odd, listening expression. Then I stared at the half-empty glass near my outstretched hand. I am a practical man. I buzzed Miss Evans on the office inter-com. "Miss Evans, come in for a moment, please."

Miss Evans appeared, took one look at my suspended visitor, gave a low moan and stood stock-still, clutching her steno pad and pencil as if they were weapons.

"Tell me what you see," I barked, conscious of tiny pin-pricks at the base of my scalp. Miss Evans didn't answer. Her mouth was a thin, pinched line. Her eyes were glued on my visitor.

"Well?" I rasped harshly. "Is he standing up there or isn't he?"

All this time, Pinkerton Fly just remained where he was, regarding us with that peculiar listening air about him.

Miss Evans lowered her gaze. Her secretarial calm was in ruins. I could see that. Her voice forced its way out of her tightly locked lips.

"I see it—but it's a trick—Mr. Borne—it can't be—it's not possible—"

"That will be all, Miss Evans. Go out and draw up a contract. I'll call you when I need you."

SHE flung a last look at Pinkerton Fly but his great height from the floor only seemed to mock her reason and sanity still more. With a low scream, she fled through the door, leaving it ajar. I came around the desk, closed the portal softly and went back to my chair. I took a great deal of time lighting up a cigar, taking an elaborate delay stoking it up properly. I leaned back in my swivel and brought my eyes slowly up from room level to Pinkerton Fly. He was still *there*. Standing serenely, defying the law of gravity, waiting expectantly for me to say something.

"Well—" I got my courage up. "Walk on *air*. Go ahead. That's what your card says. Show me. The Showman is asking you to show him something."

Wordlessly, Pinkerton Fly *walked* around the room. Somewhere about four feet above my head. Normally, naturally, as if he were taking a stroll about any room in the whole wide world. My wall paintings were at his foot level; his waspish bald head was nearly scraping the ceiling. Then he threw the topper in. He

did a handstand in mid-air. Until you've seen a man do a handstand in mid-air with his two hands braced against nothingness as though it were the most substantial of hand-holds, you haven't seen anything.

I had another drink. A tall, stiff one. I waved my free hand at him feebly. "Turn it off," I hoarsed. "Whatever it is. Come on down. Fast. That's enough."

He did. It was as if a fast elevator brought him down to the floor. He landed with a light thud, softly and deftly on his toes. Then he spoke for the first time. I was a little surprised to find he had one of the most normal, nasal voices in the world.

"Then you believe I can do it, Mister Borne? You are convinced?"

I was past argument. "I'm convinced it will be one of the greatest stunts ever seen in any circus, anywhere." My mind was flying. "The house is packed, high above the crowd, in the lighted arena—you walking across the air. No tight-wire, no ropes, no nets. No nothing. People will refuse to believe. They'll claim I've run some invisible wire across the space between the two poles. But—they'll pay to see it. Pay plenty."

Suddenly, he sighed. "That is good. Zelma will be pleased."

"Zelma? What does she do—

the same thing? Say, a double would be even better—

"You don't understand." He smiled at me. His smile was like a weak candle lighting up his yellow face. "Zelma is my wife. She has taught me how to walk on air."

We were back to that again. My reasoning mind had been giving me a bad time about it.

"You really did it, didn't you? You didn't trick me—you didn't hypnotize me or anything like that? No, of course not. I did see you do it. I'm not blind but—"

As if in answer, he Nijinskyed up into the air again, scissored his legs and stood on solid nothing for a full minute, then came down again. I noticed the listening business once more. He'd cock his head forward as if to catch something that was being said. His head remained in that position all the time he was aloft.

I shook myself dumbly. It was unbelievable. Anyway you look at it.

"You sure you didn't escape from the Moon or something? Are you a citizen?"

The candle lighted his sallow complexion. "I am a native New Yorker, Mister Borne."

I fiddled with my cigar. "How do you do it?"

The candle went out in his

face. "I can't tell you. Zelma wouldn't like it. John Henry could have told you. But John Henry is dead. He was Zelma's first husband."

This of course was pure Greek to me. But handling circus people for thirty years has convinced me they have to talk a little differently from other people. Anybody that risks their necks every day for a couple of bucks is entitled to talk different, don't you think? What the hell—if Pinkerton Fly had developed a method to walk on air without any visible aids—it was his secret and his business. I never argue with a sure-fire act.

"Okay, that's it. You'll start immediately. Tomorrow's performance. Center ring. I'll squeeze you in between the bare-back rider and the animal act of Dan Burley." I let out a big laugh. "Are you going to open a lot of eyes and fill that old box office with the coin of the realm! This will be the biggest act since Barnum was a pup. **THE MAN WHO WALKS ON AIR—THE GREATEST SHOW off EARTH!**"

**I**T WAS.

The audience was stunned into unthinking silence. I didn't even give Pinkerton Fly an eye-catching costume. Just threw a terrific spotlight on him, standing

on the small scaffold shelving off from the thin, towering pole. It had the effect I had hoped for. A small, undernourished figure in a shabby, meaningless gray suit ambling off the platform high above the ground and strolling serenely across space to the opposite pole.

Just like I said. Lights all over the place to show them there were no ropes, pulleys or trick wiring to suspend him as he walked. If anything, the very naturalness of his ambling gait precluded any idea of wiring of some kind. You just had to believe your own eyes. Here was a skinny little guy walking on air. Walking on nothing.

I had some qualms though. Maybe, I had been drunk in the office. So as a part of that first time he went on, I had a standby crew of roustabouts at convenient positions with a net in case he needed it. But, if anything, it lent something rather than detracted from the performance. It was a little funny to watch the big, burly crew circle warily beneath him, high up in the air, moving steadily with him on the trip across utter space.

The audience reaction was electric. The Great Fly, The Man Who Walked On Air captured the imagination. I wish I could show you the attendance receipts from the first month of business.

Capacity every performance. The Benzo Brothers had been my star act and Dan Burley's sensational act with the lions had always been reliable crowd-getters. But they couldn't compare with the Great Fly. He was unbeatable.

Funny thing though. I kept wondering when the Great Fly was going to come down. An act that's always up in the air has to come down sometime. It was sooner than I expected.

I was coming back to go over an added clause in Pinkerton Fly's contract when I heard a big argument going on inside Lola's dressing room. Lola is the best bareback rider Tomlin's Three Ring ever had. Also, the love-liest.

I pushed into the little room to find Lola, still in her skimpy costume, pushing between a very belligerent Dan Burley and a very frightened Pinkerton Fly. Dan looked plenty sore about something and besides being a terrific animal trainer, he was one of the brawniest customers you'd ever want to see. Bad blood among the performers can kill any circus, so I cut in.

"What's going on here—a rodeo or something? The show's been over a full fifteen minutes!"

"Oh, yeah?" Burley's expression was ugly. "Fly doesn't think so. Fly thinks Lola needs some help changing her dress."

"That's a lie!" Pinkerton Fly, for his size, way actually standing up to the giant.

Lola's sensuous face told me plenty the way she smiled at Pinkerton and glowered at Burley.

"Mr. Borne," she appealed to me, "I've had about all I can stand of this muscle-bound cat trainer! I asked the Fly in here. Burley has no right to dictate to me."

"Haven't I?" The animal trainer seized her wrist in a vise. "You forget a lot of things, Lola. Like—"

She flung away from him, picked up one of her riding crops that was dangling from a strap-rack and before any of us could stop her, slashed him full across the mouth with it. Dan stopped, the sudden welt across his strong face making his expression even uglier.

With that, he pushed past me out of the dressing room.

"Lola, you shouldn't have done that!" I stormed.

Her glance was contemptuous of my opinion. "There's nothing in my contract that says I have to cater to Dan Burley. If I like Pinkerton, that's my business."

Pinkerton Fly's sallow face smiled at her words. I put my oar in, playing what I thought was a trump card.

"But he's a married man, Lola. Aren't you, Pinkerton?"

He leered at me. "What Zelma doesn't know won't hurt her."

I was dumbfounded. First, because I couldn't see what Lola saw in him. Secondly, because I had thought he wasn't the type. But I guess with someone as breathtaking as Lola anyone was the type. As for her, men were just toys who were discarded after she tired of them. I threw up my hands.

"I hope you two know what you're doing," I concluded meekly.

Lola winked. It made her dazzling. "We'll be all right, Mr. Borne. Won't we, Pinky?"

Well, that finished any arguments I might have had. When Lola started calling him Pinky, I could see he was finished.

**I**T WENT on being "Pinky" for four weeks.

It was something like the 65th day of capacity business. The receipts were as high as Mount Everest. The Man Who Walked On Air—Who Didn't Need A Net—Who Never Fell—was packing them in. Tomlin's Three Ring was having its biggest season under my direction. But I wasn't kidding myself. Without Fly, it wouldn't have been a case of There's No Bu\$ine\$\$ Like \$how Bu\$ine\$\$.

So I was feeling pretty good when word came that Pinkerton

Fly wanted to see me. The Lola business was out of my hands anyway and Dan Burley had restricted himself to his tigers so everything had been pretty calm.

But the Fly certainly got into my ointment in a hurry.

"It's too little, Mister Borne," he said, ignoring my outstretched hand.

"What is, Pinkerton?" I *was* feeling too good to notice his breach of etiquette.

"My salary."

"Your salary?" I echoed. "Two thousand a week isn't sawdust, Pinkerton. For a First-of-May in the circus game, it's unheard of. Not that you don't deserve it, of course—"

"That's just it, Mister Borne." His tiny skull shone under the overheads. His small eyes held a new glint of avarice. Something that didn't quite jibe with his undersized build. "I do deserve it. I do deserve more.

I took a long time lighting one of my favorite cigars. After all, he *was* my biggest act on the card.

"Ten thousand dollars," he said.

My teeth came down hard on the end of the cigar.

"You're crazy, Pinkerton!"

"Am I?" His eyes gleamed brighter. "It's either that or the Man Who Walks On Air—"

"—doesn't walk," I concluded

wearily. "Pinkerton, this is pretty close to blackmail. I could hold you to your contract."

"You could," he admitted, surprisingly enough, "but I'd still be on the ground. Doing nothing. Even a court of law couldn't make me walk on air."

I could see his point. I shook my head.

"Pinkerton, Lola put you up to this. It figures. She wants a fur coat, or a Cadillac. That's it, isn't it?"

He ignored my question and asked one of his own. The same one.

"Ten thousand, Mister Borne?"

Suddenly, I hated his nasal voice, his utter blindness to the ways of man-eaters like Lola.

"All right. Ten thousand. We're agreed. I'll have a new contract drawn up tomorrow."

He licked his lips, abruptly looking surprised at himself for pulling it off. He gave a nervous little giggle, whirled and left the tent.

I stared after him for a long time before I went back to my office, cursing Fly and the circus business in general.

**I** HAD company. Company I had never expected. Zelma Fly. Mrs. Zelma Fly.

I was amazed at her appearance. She was—well, beautiful. An exotic woman, tall, well-made



with the oddest eyes I have ever seen. They were deep blue, striking, and you found yourself slightly overcome with their overpowering levelness of direction. It seemed an eternity before she blinked. An eon before she got down to the reason for her visit.

She seemed troubled. There had been rumors, some talk about Pinkerton and Lola. Naturally, she scarcely credited them but—

Getting control of a queer feeling of uncertainty, I explained the whole thing as well as I could, going as easy as possible on Pinkerton Fly. In a way, I was glad she had come. I was just curious enough to find out more about this walking-on-air business.

"So that's the whole thing, Mrs. Fly. Harmless enough, I guess. It's just that Lola is bad for any man. You'll understand what I mean when I say she could lead a thirsty horse away from water."

She stirred slightly. It was as if a soft wind had wafted over her. Her eyes were fathomless.

"Thank you, Mr. Borne. It is well that you told me. I am glad."

Suddenly, I thought less of the idea. Something about Zelma Fly said it wasn't all right, shouted to the rooftops that Pinkerton Fly had been very, very

stupid to trifle with her affections.

I tried to laugh.

"So that's it—all I can suggest is that you pay more attention to your husband. Come and see him work. Maybe he'd straighten out if you came to see him perform. Say, that's an idea. I'll reserve a seat for you. Might make all the difference in the world."

She waited a long time before answering. In the interim, I mixed myself a drink. There was an air about Zelma Fly that made me extremely uneasy. I felt like I was giving a baby a lighted match to play with.

"Yes, Mr. Borne," she purred in a manner that was more cat than woman. "It is a fine idea. Tonight I will come at your kind invitation. As you say, Pinkerton has been dazzled by this Lola person. Yes, perhaps you are right. It is settled. I'll be there."

I saw her to the door, still sensing the monumental proportions of an error that hadn't matured yet.

"Tell me, Mrs. Fly." I couldn't resist the question. "You are responsible for your husband's fantastic ability to walk on air. At least, that's what he told me. Tell me—how does he do it?"

She turned as if I had uttered an improper remark. Then her stiffened back relaxed and her

smile was a slow, somehow deadly thing.

"It is so very easy, Mr. Borne. I simply tell him that he *can* walk on air. That is the simple truth of it. Pinkerton walks on air because I told him that I *believe* he can."

I laughed, partly to appreciate a joke I didn't understand, more so to relieve a tension that was clutching my insides like a wet, clammy hand.

As soon as the door closed behind her, I had another drink. And another one.

I suddenly felt that I had pulled a lid off a garbage can that I should never have gone near. I opened the windows wide and thought for a long time.

All day it bothered me and when Tomlin's Three Ring band beat up its first sounds of overture that night, I was as confused as ever.

The whole thing was so curious. Now I was thinking of Pinkerton Fly walking on air and how fantastic it really was. Hell, a man just couldn't do that when you got right down to it. It was a trick. It had to be. Mass hypnosis or the power of suggestion. I remembered the letters I had received wanting explanations. The University, the Magician's Union—

Well, before I knew it, the Benzo Brothers had cannoned

into space, the Ringmaster had put Lola through her paces on beautiful white Nellie and Dan Burley had tamed lions and tigers for a solid half hour. And then—the Great Fly was on.

I hurried to the grandstand. I wanted to watch the Fly walk on air with his wife as company.

She seemed pleased to see me. Cold and distant but still pleased.

"Mr. Borne. I'm glad you joined me."

"Pleasure," I lied. "You'll get a good view from here."

"So will you, Mr. Borne. An eyeful as you Americans say." I had somehow always known there was a touch of European in her.

A fanfare skied to the tent-top with a burst of musical noise.

"Well, here he is—the Great Fly."

"Yes," she echoed, sounding like the knell of doom. "Here he is."

The fanfare died and the spotlight picked him out, standing idly on the tiny shelf that jutted from the towering thinness of the big pole. Still in his shabby, meaningless gray suit, his sickly build. Even from where I sat, I could see the curious, cocked position of his head. Still in that listening attitude.

The crowd hushed as the drum roll started up, waited in that heart beat of eternity for Fly's

feet to step off the shelf onto nothing. The drummers came down on a loud bassoon that always made everybody jump with its unexpected interruption . . . and the Great Fly walked casually off his tiny platform.

It was amazing really. Some seventy-five feet separated one towering shaft from another and until you've seen a man bridge that distance by walking on nothing but air, you haven't seen a thing. You could have heard a watch being wound as Fly's feet struck forth and gobbled up yards of airy ground.

Slowly, carefully, yet completely naturally, he ambled across a thousand memories.

**I** BROKE my eyes away from Pinkerton's brand of magic and looked at Zelma Fly.

I was hardly prepared for what I saw.

Her head was flung back, her mouth distended and the muscles in her throat had leaped into focus. Alarmed, I reached for

her. Thousands of eyes were levelled skyward on the Great Fly.

But abruptly, sound rushed from her throat, blending into a leaping, sarcastic burst of laughter that reverberated across the hushed arena with the volume of a cannonade.

That laugh lingers in my ears to this day. And its effect. The peal of rippling sarcasm filled the vast amphitheatre, hung poised like a deadly python.

I forced my eyes upward, to where Pinkerton Fly was.

It was uncanny. He had halted, was standing stock-still up there on his floor of air.

He stared down at us, toward the source of the condemning laughter and I could see the utter surprise and consternation written in every line of him. His meaningless form had taken on meaning now. New, terrible meaning with the accent on terror.

Suddenly, he clawed convulsively at walls that weren't there,

pawed frantically for hand-holds that didn't exist. A hoarse shout escaped him. And still Zelma Fly laughed. Long, loud, incessantly.

Then it happened. A mammoth roar of fear went up. Shock ripped from ten thousand throats.

A long scream trailed off into the night and Pinkerton Fly plummeted to earth like a heavy rock dropped into a well. Down he came, his terror welling out of him, sirening his way deathward. The thud of his body against the hard-packed floor of the arena was a crunch of sound no one who was there will ever forget.

Dan Burley and the clowns reached him first and wisely threw a spangled robe over him. The crowd was rooted to their seats as the band, snapping out of its trance, struck up a cover-up medley that was louder than music from hell. And Zelma Fly's long laugh had broken into fitful sobbing. Lola fainted and Burley slung her over his shoulder and pushed through the mob that had gathered.

There was nothing I could do really. The show was far from over—it was going on. I turned to Zelma Fly. She had relaxed in her chair, suddenly limp and spent.

I had a hard time finding my

voice, finding the right words with which to condemn her.

"You—did it," I panted. "As if you'd shot him in cold blood, as if you'd run him over—that laugh—."

The face she turned towards me was no longer beautiful. Just naked and terrible. Just deep, hidden emotion suddenly exposed to the light.

"No, Mr. Borne," she barely breathed the words. "He knew I no longer believed he *could* walk on air. My laugh merely told him that."

"But it's murder!" I shouted. "You killed him. Just as you—" I found myself saying it as if I'd known it all the time—"killed John Henry, your first husband."

"Yes," she hissed. "Exactly like that. Only that was the Paris Circus. And her name was Yvonne."

I got away from her fast. Back to my office, back to reality.

That's all there is to the story. Except one thing more.

Dan Burley quit the show, quit cold. Quit Lola, quit everything. I still have his telegram somewhere in my drawer:

GETTING MARRIED TO  
ZELMA FLY — NO MORE  
ANIMALS FOR ME — WISH  
ME LUCK

Stop. . . .