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or, Sky-Larking in Cloudland.

Mary H. Myers

“Carlotta, the Lady Aeronaut”

In 1871 Mary Breed Hawley (1849–1932) married Carl Myers, an itinerant, self-taught inventor who became interested in what was called “aerial navigation.” Her husband’s experiments led to a patent for a new kind of balloon fabric—lightweight and impervious to hydrogen gas, it was strong enough to survive the repeated unfolding and folding of a balloon’s gas bag before and after each ascent—and a lucrative career as a balloon designer. Myers initially hired an experienced aeronaut to fly his balloons, but when he could not get one to fly a new design, he went up himself. Watching her husband soar through the sky, Mary Myers decided that she, too, wanted to fly.

Her first ascent took place on July 4, 1880, in Little Falls, New York. Thinking her own name of “Mary” somehow inappropriate for such daring behavior, she styled herself “Carlotta, the lady aeronaut.” (Her husband became “the Professor.”) A crowd of some 15,000 people watched her debut, and her career was under way. In 1888, in one of her most-watched feats, she flew her balloon, *Zephyr*, over Brooklyn and lower Manhattan, landing in Secaucus, New Jersey. In 1889, the couple bought a mansion in Frankfort, New York, which became the “Balloon Farm,” a tourist attraction and research center. By the time she retired from exhibition flying in 1891, Carlotta had made more ascents, it was claimed, than “any man living in America.” She did this without significant injury, though some of her flights—like the one she describes here—came close to ending in disaster.

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This ascension, made during the Fair at Norwich, N.Y., Thursday, September 9, 1880, was in strong contrast to the previous one. As the hour appointed for the ascension approached, the wind began to blow in strong gusts, and I was anxious to get safely afloat on the open aerial sea before the arrival of a storm which might wreck my craft while leaving port.

During a calmer interval the balloon arose steadily, while I stood erect in the basket with open knife ready to cut ballast loose if necessary. As the blast again struck it the top inclined and the whole balloon was then forced to "tack" downward, just as the inclined sails of a vessel push it one way or another, only the sails can be inclined to tack either way, while a balloon always inclines to be blown down at starting; so that although the balloon had at first risen rapidly, it now became necessary to cut loose two twenty pound bags of sand to counteract this downward action of the wind, when the "Aerial" righted with a quick swing and sped upward, while I waved my flag in response to shouts below.

When a thousand feet high I released four carrier pigeons, which made a wide circle before turning homeward. A moment later I rushed into a dense cloud and saw no more of earth or balloon, while the cords sustaining the basket and even the basket itself became invisible to me, the rapidly moving index of the barometer, (held near my face to see it,) and the downward rush of moist air being the only proofs of my swift rising.

After a few minutes in this blank solitude I became anxious about the safety of the balloon, which during this unchecked upward flight must be rapidly expanding and in need of attention; for although it was arranged to avoid bursting through expansion, I was still liable to be suffocated with a flood of gas from its mouth when the balloon became over-full. While I hesitated a faint odor of gas decided me, and I pulled the valve cord while I noted the barometer, which still marked an undiminished speed upward. Several pulls on the valve were necessary before the barometer indicated any check in the speed, indeed I began to think that the instrument acted like a watch, whose springs and wheels turn the hands only forward.

Finally, at diminished speed, the basket was dragged upward into a clearer atmosphere, and the balloon again became visible, as I arose

above the snow-white mountains of cloud-land. Sailing above and occasionally through these topmost peaks was chilly sport, which soon ended in my attempting to "slide down hill," by letting out gas. The downward plunge renewed all the discomforts of my ascent, but the speed of falling was controlled by sprinkling out sand according to hints the barometer gave. I was much longer coming down than going up, and I was just beginning to think the world had somehow got loose and lost itself, when, through an opening in the mist, the earth suddenly jumped up at me, and I found myself swiftly driving at a few feet elevation over a woods several miles in extent. Not wishing to alight here I threw over everything dispensable, ballast, ulster, waterproof, rubbers, and lastly the two carrier pigeons kept for final messengers; but a gust of rain rendered the balloon too heavy to rise, and it bounded rapidly across the tree-tops, with "a hop, skip, and a jump;" the basket collecting leaves, twigs and acorns at every plunge, till an immense bass wood tree, looming high above the forest, threatened to wreck craft, crew and cargo. I cast anchor immediately, the grapnel dragging till its straining rope just allowed two wide-spread branches of the basswood to catch the netting of the balloon, when it remained firmly held, between the cable on one side and the tree top on the other, without injury. The air ship was at anchor, in sight of land,—but there was no little boat to go on shore!

By and by a hunter came shouting through the woods, attracted by my calls, and looking everywhere except high enough. He laughed at my situation and asked me why I hadn't found a taller tree to land in. His companions, a man and a boy, soon joined him. They "didn't see how I could be got down." It was twenty feet from the balloon to the trunk of the tree, eighty feet to the ground, and two and a-half miles to the nearest house, and I began to think the basket might have to be my hammock for the night which was approaching, but I resolved to escape before if possible.

I inquired for the best climber in the neighborhood, and sent after an axe, saw and ropes. When the climber came he said it was impossible to climb the tree, as "it was thirty feet to the first limb, and two men could not reach around the trunk." I said it *must* be done, and sent for a long ladder, meanwhile employing other men in cutting down six smaller trees below the balloon, so that it might be safely lowered.

After hard work the climber mounted from the ladder up to the limbs which held the balloon, and drew up his ropes and saw.

When it was found that I purposed sawing off these two limbs they all said it could not be done, as they were very large and would come down on me and kill me. I said I had a plan to prevent that and would take all the risk if they would obey orders.

Then I directed the climber to throw me one end of a rope, which I tied to the ring over the basket, and had him haul up and tie to a limb above, thus relieving the strain on the balloon and branches, besides holding the basket level, which all this while had remained tipped on its side, with its bottom perpendicular. Next I had the climber tie a rope to one of the two limbs which he was to saw, and pass the rope across other limbs a little lower down and farther away from the balloon, letting the free end of the rope to the ground. The other limb was similarly arranged; then I divided the men into two sets and had them hold the two ropes, standing apart quite a distance from the tree and balloon, on each side. Then the climber began to saw off one limb, and when nearly sawed the men below strained on that rope, and when it was sawed off the man above and those below managed to land it nicely across a limb below, over which the rope had been passed, so it was well supported; then we served the second limb the same way. Then the climber lowered the basket and balloon down a little ways, and next one limb, and then the other, by turns, as the men let out the ropes, till the whole came down, and I found myself on the ground after hanging up there nearly two hours. We were all much fatigued, and glad to shake hands together, as we felt quite like old friends. The men said they never knew a woman could engineer a job so well before, but I guess that may be because they never before caught one "up a tree!"

Aerial Adventures of Carlotta; or, Sky-Larking in Cloudland (1883)