

## Ida M. Tarbell

### Flying—A Dream Come True!

Ida Minerva Tarbell (1857–1944) was an investigative reporter, one of the leading “muckrakers” of the Progressive Era. Born in a log cabin in western Pennsylvania, she grew up amidst the first oil fields where her father was a small oil producer and refiner. After graduating from Allegheny College, she briefly taught school in Ohio before embarking on the journalistic career that eventually landed her an editorial position at the popular *McClure’s Magazine*. It was for *McClure’s* that she wrote the piece about trusts, specifically the rise of John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company, that assured her fame. Interviewing past and present officers of the company, government regulators, and academic experts, and combing through thousands of documents, Tarbell assembled a powerful indictment of the firm’s practices and machinations. It ran in nineteen consecutive issues of *McClure’s* and then appeared as a book, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (1904), still regarded as a classic of American journalism.

Unlike many who doubted the possibility of flying machines, Tarbell seems to have long believed that “someday we should fly.” In the following account, originally a letter to an unidentified friend, she discovers, with joy and pleasant surprise, that she was not terrified—a response not uncommon among those experiencing their first airplane flight. Instead, she registers her sense of sheer exhilaration.

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I think you know that I have always believed that some day we should fly. I cannot remember the time when I did not believe this. I think it dates back to the success of my first kite. You perhaps do not remember, but I knew Professor Langley in the years that he was making his

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famous experiments on the Potomac. I shall never forget how he took me once to a big room in the Smithsonian Institution to show me the first heavier-than-air machine that actually worked. It has always been one of my griefs that he never lived to see people really going through the air. There is no doubt that his experiments contributed enormously to what we are now doing. And yet he died bitter in heart because people did not recognize the value of what he knew he had demonstrated. Then a number of years ago I was at Baddeck on Cape Breton Island, where I watched Alexander Graham Bell experimenting with kites and planes. While I have not doubted for a moment for years that men would fly, it is only recently that I have had it firmly fixed in my mind that some day I was going to fly. And the way that came about was this:

A few months ago Henry Woodhouse, the enthusiastic editor of "Flying," wrote me a note apropos of something I had happened to say to an interviewer about my faith in the future of aviation. He begged me to take a flight, to justify what I had said. I told him yes; but every one of a half dozen aviators that he chose, promptly fell and broke their necks, and finally I concluded that as I did not purpose to break mine I had better give it up. Last Monday, however, he called me on the telephone and told me he had a safe man and a safe machine, and would I come? I returned a prompt yes, only to weaken later when I realized that I had not caught the name of either man or machine. However, when I learned in a note from Mr. Woodhouse confirming our arrangements that the aviator was young McCurdy, whom I had known as a boy experimenting with Mr. Bell at Baddeck over his kites, and the machine was a Curtiss flying boat, where I did not have to sit on a cobweb but had a firm board beneath my feet, I concluded to go ahead. I went down yesterday afternoon with a party to Port Washington. In the bottom of my heart I expected that I would want to run away when I saw the machine. To keep me from doing so I really counted on the fact that I probably would be too vain to flunk before strangers; but it was curious how different it all was!

Mr. McCurdy was just taking out a pupil (a captain in the English army). The machine was drawn up on a runway. It was the innocent-looking little affair that the illustrated papers have made so familiar—

quite like her name, the *Babette*. She had a little slipper-like body with two seats just back of the steering wheel, and here McCurdy and his pupil seated themselves. The assistants pushed her off and turned her around. So far it was much like the launching of any small boat. Then McCurdy stood to start the engine, and the cry went up to those of us who were standing close to the water, "Get back, get back." I did not know why, but of course started back—not quick enough, however, to prevent the terrific wind the propeller raised from twisting my skirt and tearing off my hat. It was the first hint I had that the dainty little contrivance had a terrific force in her. She was demonstrating that, however, for before I could right my disheveled garments she had made a long run over the water, splashing and sputtering, had risen, and was soaring down the bay. She went and came in a circuit of six miles four or five times, and as I watched her I became not more fearful of going up but more fearful that I might not get a chance, for there were half a dozen people about crazy to try it.

When the *Babette* was again on the runway they told me that I might go. There were no more preparations than for an auto ride. I took off my hat and put on a little silk hood such as I use for a long trip in a machine, borrowed a pair of goggles, and stepped into the slipper. They pushed her off, turned her around, and in a moment we were racing over the water. I forgot to mention that they put me into a cork jacket, saying that of course nothing would happen but that it was a wise precaution, in case we did land in the water!

Although we must have started off at fifty miles an hour, the spray was only a few drops on my glasses. We made a circle of perhaps a quarter of a mile and then I was conscious that we were above the water. I did not know when we came out, and looked over the side of the boat to see if I was right. The surprise of it seemed to stun me. Not that I lost consciousness, but I was literally lost in amazement at the suddenness and ease of it. In the twinkle of an eye, without knowing when or how it happened, without the least sense of motion after leaving the water, I found myself a mile or more from the starting point, one hundred and fifty or two hundred feet in the air, the water, the bluffs, houses, boats slipping swiftly by far below.

It was the breaking in of these facts that seemed to bring me back to myself. My senses reasserted themselves and I became conscious that we must be flying very fast, though the motion was so gentle that it was no motion. There was no sound except the purr of the engine over our heads. You have no idea how wonderful that purring was! I think I should grow to love it. There was no sense of impact of air, although we were going at the rate of eighty-five miles an hour, no pressure on the face. There was none of the jar that you have even on the best railroad track, even at the highest speed. There was no vibration perceptible, such as wear my nerves so much even in the best of cars. You sailed and did not know that you moved. I suppose there is no word to describe what I was experiencing but—flying.

Our first lap was three miles and we must have made it in a minute and a half. Mr. McCurdy had warned me not to be frightened when we turned, because the machine would dip heavily; “I will nudge you so you will know what it means,” he said. But I knew he was turning, I felt the tilt, but I had absolutely no sense of nervousness. The only thing I did was to put out my hand on the edge of the boat, a trick of mine in any sudden motion, even in a carriage. The moving of my hand seemed to release the tension at which I was holding my body. I began to think, which I had not done before, “Here I am in the air, flying. I am not afraid, I can move about.” Just then we passed over a great sail boat with one man in it. To prove that I could move, to show Mr. McCurdy that I was not paralyzed, as he might well have believed if his attention had not been riveted on his business, I tried a feeble little wave with my hand—an act of pure bravado. You cannot imagine the joy that I had in seeing the man wave back! Then we passed a steam yacht where the people all crowded to the rail to look up at us, and I waved this time freely—enthusiastically!

In about four minutes we had made the six miles and were back at our starting point, making a great turn through the air. All our party were standing at the wharf waving to us. I couldn't get my handkerchief in time, but I could use my hands, and did. We made the second turn with the same wonderful tilt. By the time we started on our second round my senses had reasserted themselves sufficiently for me to turn right and

left, to look at the aviator, who sat as rigid as a piece of the machinery, to look at the hills, to look over the boats, to wave my hand again and again. Then the whole thing began to go to my head and I wanted to laugh and to shout. The sense of exhilaration is one that I have never known before. You seem to have gotten as far above all physical fears as you are above the earth, and you have a curious sense of being part of the whole thing.

Before he started I had said to Mr. McCurdy, "Tell me what I must not touch, because if I lose my nerve I do not want to embarrass you by seizing anything or making any false move." He pointed out to me the only thing that I better not touch, and said, "You can make no false moves. You can even stand if you want to." If we had started on our third round I know that I should have attempted to stand up. But I did not have quite time enough for that. I was a little too interested in what he was doing with the machine. For he suddenly dove down from perhaps two hundred feet in the air toward a boat with three men in it, who were watching us. He came down so suddenly that the men ducked into the bottom of the boat. Then we rose again and came down only a short distance from the landing place. I did not know when the boat struck the water except for a little spray that dashed into my face. We went straight to the landing place, making it perfectly, a much more exact and easy landing than I ever saw any kind of water-craft make.

Of course, everybody was down to meet us and I do not know how long I sat in the boat not realizing that I must get out, so overwhelmed was I with the wonder of the thing—that I had not been afraid, that it all was so natural, that the thing was so easy, so supremely superior to any other motion that I had ever experienced. I do not know anything to describe it, only to tell you that it gave the same sensation that you get in seeing a great bird lying on the air, as they do sometimes, without any apparent motion of the wings.

One of the gentlemen in the party said to me when I was back on land, "Hold out your arm, Miss Tarbell." I did it without thinking. He said, "I want to see if it is shaking," and I was very much set up to find that neither hand shook at all. I was the more satisfied with this because once when I was called up in a hotel which was on fire and was told to

come at once, I remember that I gathered up hastily a few things and started out, congratulating myself that I was so cool. As I passed through a room I saw a fan of mine that I was fond of and reached out to get it. My hand trembled so that I could scarcely get my fingers about it.

As a matter of fact, this trip of mine, to those who are familiar with aviation, is the most commonplace kind of thing, not worth a long letter like this. What I have never realized, and I suppose most people do not realize, is that there are 115,000 people flying every week, that there are 7,000 licensed aviators and at least 10,000 not licensed now in the world, that there are four great manufacturing establishments in this country—the Curtiss, that makes the flying boat that I was in yesterday; the Wrights in Dayton, Ohio; the Benoist in St. Louis; and the Burgess concern, that I think is in Massachusetts, who are so busy that it is impossible to get an order filled by them for some months. Flying is an accomplished thing. You will fly one of these days, I shall fly again—I hope. Possibly before we die we may both be traveling back and forth to business from country to city in an aëroplane!

*American Magazine*, November 1913