

FROM THE BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF HORRIBLE HISTORIES

TERRY DEARY



Inside illustrations by Helen Flook

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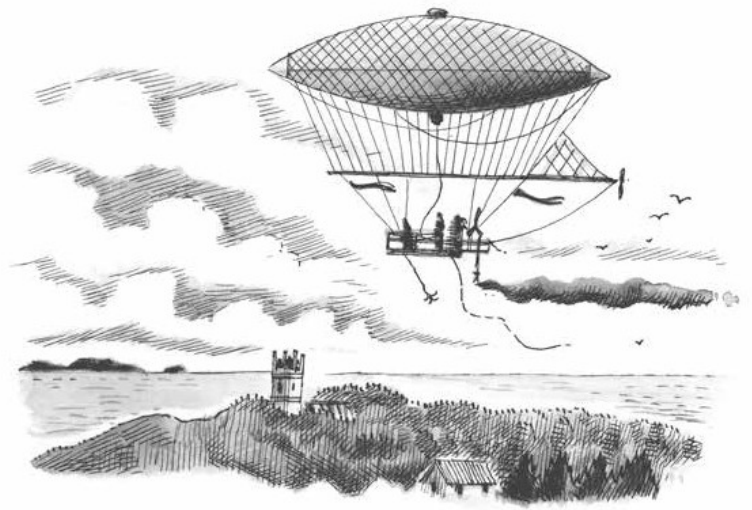


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The Fabulous Flyer



Chapter I

Paris, France, 24 September 1852

The shuffling, snuffling and scuffling of the rats woke Marie. She was used to sharing the hay loft with her twitching-whiskered, squeaking, sleek furred friends. But this morning they were racing through the hay and running away from something.



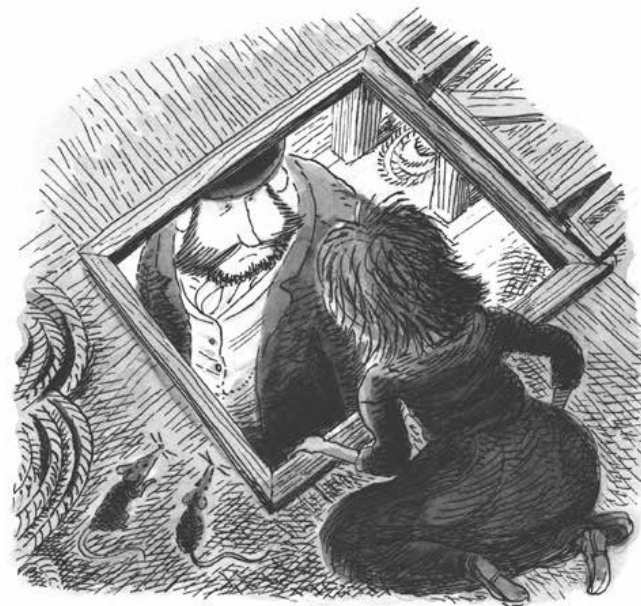
The girl stretched and yawned and scratched. A soft breath of air ruffled her hair. Someone must have opened the barn door beneath her. But that someone had opened the creaking leather hinges gently so they didn't wake her. Only the running rats had heard it.

Marie rose to her feet and brushed hay from her plain grey dress. She tiptoed to the trapdoor and looked down to the barn floor below. The early morning light spilled through the open door.

A large man crept over the floor, quite silent in his soft leather boots. His top hat was as tall as a clown's shoe is long.

But his face was not the face of a clown. His face was purple-red and his eyes were wide in the semi-darkness. He stretched out a hand and grasped the creamy linen cloth that was stretched tight over a wooden

frame. "Nice," he muttered, and his dark eyes glittered.



"No," Marie gasped.

He looked up, as guilty as a dog caught with a stolen sausage. He saw the girl and his mouth turned down in a sneer.

Marie had seen greater hate in faces when she begged on the Paris streets. She wasn't afraid.

“Don’t touch it,” she said.

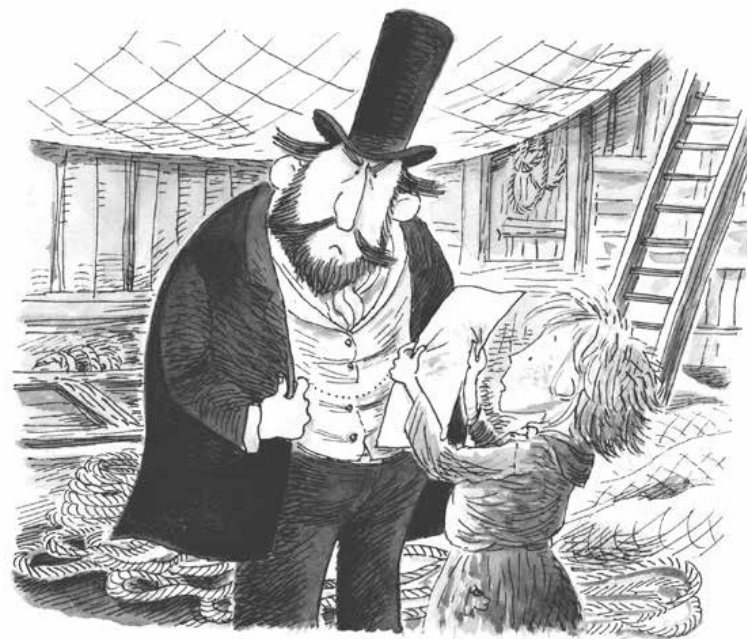
The man placed his hands on his hips and looked up. “Mr Giffard owes me twenty francs for rent on this barn. He hasn’t paid so he can get out.” The man waved a hand at the linen. “I’ll sell this cloth to get my money.”

“I’ll give you the money,” Marie said. “Give me a day, Mr Herbert, and I will pay you twenty – no, twenty-five francs. I promise.”

The man’s mean mouth fell open. “What? Where would a street urchin like you get twenty-five francs? You’ve never seen twenty-five francs in your whole miserable life.”

“Henri Giffard is going to be famous... rich and famous. I’ll show you,” she said, and scrambled down the ladder from the

loft. She dropped, mouse-light, to the floor beside Mr Herbert. His gold watch and chain glittered in the light from the dove-grey sky. She licked her lips. It would be so easy for her thin fingers to steal the watch and chain. She’d done it a dozen times before. Instead she stood up straight and looked the man in the eye.



She waved a piece of paper in Herbert's face. "See?"

"What does it say?" he grumbled.

"Read it," she said.

"*You* read it," he replied.

The girl's thin face split in a grin. "I can't read."



The man scowled. "Neither can I."

Marie sighed. "It's a poster," she explained.

"I can see that."

"It says Mr Henri Giffard will fly the first powered air machine in history," she told the man.

He snorted. "People have been flying balloons for as long as I can remember. Nothing new about that."

"No-o," she groaned. She let the poster flutter to the floor as her fingers twitched to take his gleaming watch.

"Mr Giffard says hot air balloons are like soap bubbles – they are blown by the wind. They float, they don't fly. He's invented this thing he calls an 'airship'. Mr Giffard will use steam power to make his airship fly anywhere in France... anywhere in the world," she said proudly.

"No he won't," Herbert said.

"He won't?"

The man leaned forward till Marie could smell the perfumed wax on his beard.

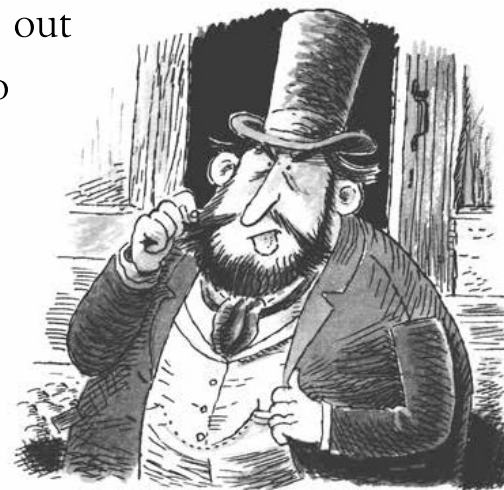
“He won’t. Because I am going to take the linen off his balloon and sell it. Now get out of my way, urchin.”

Chapter 2

Marie jumped in front of the large man. “You’ll get your twenty francs,” she cried. “When Mr Giffard flies his steam-powered airship, the people of Paris will make him their hero. These posters are all over the city.”

“I don’t want a hero in my barn. I want to rent it out to a man who can pay me money.

“No, no, wait. I will be going round the crowd and



collecting money. There will be thousands there. I bet I get a hundred francs at least. I can easily pay you twenty-five.”

The man twisted his waxed moustache. “Then you can easily pay me fifty,” he said and his weasel eyes sparkled bright as his watch chain.

“Fifty?”

“Fifty... or I tear this balloon apart now.”

“Ohhhh,” Marie moaned. “Fifty it is.”

The man stepped over the tangle of ropes that lay on the barn floor and walked to the door.

“Before darkness falls tonight, or Henri Giffard will come back to find the lock has changed. You have twelve hours.” He jabbed a finger towards the girl. “And you will be back sleeping in the gutter where he found you.”

She gave him her sweetest smile.

“Twelve hours, Mr Herbert. You are the kindest man in the whole of this barn.”

The man grunted and pushed his way through the door. The girl stuck out a tongue at his back.



She opened the lid of a small metal box. Mr Giffard had made it for her to put her bread and cheese in, and keep out the rats. Marie liked the rats... but they could

find their own food. Every day she went around to the bakers to beg for yesterday's old bread. She sat on the floor to chew and shoo away the whisker-twitching rats.

When the barn door opened again Henri Giffard walked in. He was thin and worried-looking, and the soot of the railway yard had turned his pale skin grey as the morning clouds. His suit was getting old, and his shirt was as thin as rainwater.



Marie jumped to her feet. “Are you ready to go, Mr Giffard?” she asked.

He frowned and waved a bony hand. “No, no, child. It’s too windy. The airship will fly against a light breeze but not a wind like this.”

“But you have to,” she groaned. “You have to fly in the next twelve hours.”

“Why?”

“Because... we had the posters made... people will be coming out to watch,” she said. The girl had made herself the inventor’s guardian, and didn’t want to worry him with the threats from the hateful Herbert.

“They will, but...”

“And you’ve taken the day off work at the railway workshop. If you take another day they won’t pay you. The manager might sack you. You’ll starve.”

Henri rubbed a hand over his smoke-stained brown hair. It stood up like a chimney-sweep's brush, only twice as sooty. "I don't know," he sighed.

"And your friends from the railway workshops are coming over before they start work. They'll push the airship to the Hippodrome racetrack. They'll be here any time now. They had to get out of bed extra early. But they won't come again tomorrow."



"Perhaps."

"Here they are now. Oh, Mr Giffard, you have to fly today. You *have* to."

The man looked up at the sky where the winds whipped the ragged clouds towards the west. He stroked his bearded face and blinked. "Very well, I will fly."

Marie let out a low sigh that rattled the nests of the rats.

Chapter 3

It was ten o'clock before the monstrous balloon was in place on the open grass of the Hippodrome racetrack. The people of Paris had begun to gather.



Some brought picnics – Marie watched with a watering mouth as the servants of a family of five unloaded a basket from their carriage with a feast enough for fifty.

Their coachmen spread a rug on the grass and laid the plates and glasses and silver forks and spoons on the rug. Then they covered the plates in hams and sliced meats, fine white bread, and sauces and pickles and sweetmeats and fruits and salads.

There was a case full of wine that the children sipped with water, and lemon squashes and orange juices to cool them under the warm September sun.



Henri Giffard and his friends fanned the stove that filled the balloon with hot air while Marie picked up an old leather bucket with a poster on the side.

“It’s a marvellous sight you’re about to see,” she cried to the crowd. “But Mr Giffard the inventor has spent every last sou on this marvellous airship.”

She held up the bucket and rattled a few coins.



“Give us your money. He hasn’t enough money to even buy any lunch,” she added as she began to drift towards the rich family at their picnic.

People began to drop money into her bucket. She noticed the poor gave more than the rich.

A boy about Marie’s age wandered towards the fine feast. His clothes were fine - suspiciously so for someone who didn’t look like he’d had a decent meal for a while. Stolen clothes, Marie guessed. His hungry, beady eyes darted from the food towards Marie’s bucket with the growing collection of coins.

A small boy in a green velvet suit from the picnic family threw a chicken leg towards her. “Here, he can eat that,” the boy said, and smirked as his family clapped their jewelled hands.

“Thank you, sir,” Marie cried out loud. Then she quietly muttered, “I would like to thank you by shoving the bone down your little throat.”

The father of the family called, “I say, girl. When does this thing go up? We can’t wait forever.”

“I’ll ask,” Marie offered. and crossed towards the airship.

She took the food to Henri Giffard who was untangling the ropes that were holding a wood and wicker cabin below the air bag of the mighty ship. The wind caught the balloon as it rose and tugged at the heavy pegs that had been hammered into the grass.

As she handed him the chicken she asked, “Is everything going to work, Mr Giffard?”

“I don’t think so,” he groaned. “The balloon is filled with hydrogen gas.



It will float. I don’t see how I can feed the fire that powers the steam engine *and* work the sails that steer it. The airship needs *two* people to drive it.”

One of the railway workers called across the cabin, “And he won’t get one of us going up with him.” He laughed. “We don’t want to die.”

“You’re too heavy,” the inventor shrugged.

Marie sighed. “Well, *I* would do it but I need to...”

“Perfect,” the man with the sooty hair gasped. “Climb in, Marie.”

“But the money...”

That was when the beady-eyed boy in the fine clothes stepped forward.

“Here, Miss, let me take that for you. I’ll look after it if you want a little ride with the great man. Leave it with me.”

Marie’s eyes went narrow. “You’ll steal it.”

The boy’s mouth fell open. “I would sooner steal my mother’s wedding ring,” he told her.

She began to shake her head, but Henri Giffard cried out, “The pegs are breaking free. The airship will leave without us. Quickly, Marie!”



“Ohhhh,” she cried and thrust the bucket into the hands of the boy. “Take it... collect as much as you can. We need every franc.”

The ropes began to creak and sing in the wind. The inventor was already in the rising cabin and reached down to grasp Marie’s hand. He pulled her up beside him.

The ferret-faced boy looked up and smiled. “I’ll make a fortune, don’t worry. I’ll make a fortune.”

With a crack and a slap, the last rope tore loose and the Giffard airship rose into the goose-grey September sky.

Chapter 4

The fire in the steam engine crackled and the wind moaned through the ropes as Marie and Henri rose above the crowds. All faces were turned up towards them like white daisies on the grass.

