

## The Duck, the Rooster, the Sheep and the Hot Air Balloon

Once upon a time, back in the 1790s, in a quiet farmyard not far from Paris, there was a very, very old duck that nobody ever listened to anymore—well, nobody except for a small group of ducklings who just loved to listen to stories, that is. The old duck's name was Auguste, and there was always a crowd of little listeners gathered around his old webbed feet. The ducklings begged and begged the old duck to tell them their favourite story. Finally, Auguste had no choice but to give in. He then found a comfortable spot where he could settle in and tell them his tale—again! The ducklings fell silent and they, too, settled in as best they could. They loved the soothing sound of the old duck's voice as he told his story—one that they had heard many, many times before but of which they never grew tired.

“Yes, children, it is true. King Louis XVI himself once came to see Auguste the Duck! Yes, that's right. Your old grandfather Auguste. But what the King really came to see was the hot air balloon!”

The ducklings' eyes grew wide and they all held their breaths.

The old duck continued, “If I told you that I saw Paris beneath my feet and that I played with the wind and the clouds, what would you say then? Well, I guess I'd better start at the beginning. Before I came to this farmyard to live out my golden years, I belonged to the Montgolfier brothers, Joseph and Etienne—which was no picnic, I can assure you. What a pair those two were.

“They also had a rooster named Franz and a sheep named Hubert. The brothers were always running around looking up at the sky. Sometimes, they would stop for hours, just looking at the clouds. Then they would be off again to cut canvas or haul straw. They certainly kept us animals entertained! One day, we decided to get a bit closer to the house to see if we could figure out what they were so excited about, but also because they were so distracted they had forgotten to feed us! We hid near the window, where we could see what was going on. Luckily for us, their canary's cage (the canary's name was Barnabé, by the way) was right near the window. He told us what all the fuss was about—you wouldn't believe what a mess the house was! Strewn about the room, there were rolls of paper, leftover food from rushed meals and quills for writing—Franz couldn't help but notice that several of the feathers were yellow. Only a few books, one of which was very thick, seemed to be put away properly. Barnabé pointed the big book out to us. He said that the brothers looked at it all the time and very carefully before embarking on their dangerous experiments.

“He said in his tiny little canary's voice that the Montgolfier brothers were obsessed with flying, just like the birds up in the sky, but that with their thin, clumsy arms they just couldn't get off the ground. They just had to find another way. But what other way could there be?”

“Barnabé told us, ‘One day, Joseph, the eldest brother, was drying his shirt in front of the fireplace. He noticed the shirt billowing upwards. It was filled with hot air. It practically floated right up to the ceiling. From that day onward’, continued Barnabé, ‘the Montgolfier brothers spent their time cutting cloth and sewing the pieces together. They made better and better drawings of bigger and bigger balloons that they would then build and fill with hot air’.

“At this point in the story, Hubert the Sheep, who wasn't really that interested in flying things, went off to find some nice green grass to chew on. So, that's what the brothers were up to. We found out some more several days later when we overheard the brothers talking. ‘Let's keep quiet about it’, they kept saying. ‘Just imagine for a minute what would happen if the neighbours smelled the burning straw and saw a huge canvas sphere rising up in the air in our garden—they would steal our idea! And our idea is so simple. When we heat the air, it becomes lighter. Once it is trapped inside the cloth balloon, it carries the whole thing up, up, and away. If someone were to steal the invention out from under our feet, it would be a disaster’.

“Franz the Rooster was quite annoyed. ‘I wish those two boys—silly beasts!—would leave us birds alone! We are the kings of the sky! Men have no business up there!’ But Hubert the Sheep (his mouth still full of grass) couldn't help but to add that roosters were too lazy to fly and that it was high time they learned, before the Montgolfier brothers beat them to it! Franz's pride was hurt, so he turned on his claws and stalked off, muttering to himself.

“Hubert had no idea how right he was. The very next day, the two brothers began looking at us quite intently. Through the window, we saw them make drawing after drawing. Once again, it was Barnabé the Canary to our rescue. The time had come for the Montgolfier brothers to think big, to build a colossal balloon filled with hot air, and to make it rise into the sky for all of the most important people to see. It was time to lay a public claim to their invention so that it would be theirs forever. The brothers said, ‘Why not show the King of France himself? He won't believe his eyes. And why not also put a man on board the balloon during the experiment? The first man ever to leave the Earth, to see the clouds up close—and perhaps even to touch the sun! No, no—much too dangerous. Maybe man is not meant to fly! Maybe we could send some animals up instead of humans? If they

survive, we will be able to send man up to conquer the skies without worry’.

“We then understood why the Montgolfier brothers had been looking at us so intently lately.

“The big day finally came. The date was 19 September 1783, on the grounds of the chateau at Versailles. Lots of curious onlookers had gathered to see the event, of course, but also to pay their respects to the King, who was surrounded by regal-looking white-bearded old men who were busy talking amongst themselves.

“For the first time ever, we were about to see the final result of all of the brothers’ activity. It was a giant balloon, made partly from cotton canvas sewn onto paper and inflated by burning straw. A basket was attached to its base. Why the basket? We had no idea. We were going to have to find out if we could survive flying. I will admit that we were scared out of our wits, even if Franz pretended he didn’t care and Hubert tried to look relaxed by nibbling on one of the flower beds in the huge garden. ‘Why don’t they use that big, thick book of theirs? It is heavy enough, at least’, he muttered. Barnabé shut him up with a sharp peck on the head.

“Once the canvas balloon was filled with hot air, it had to be tied down with rope to keep it from floating away all by itself. That was when they grabbed us animals—gently but firmly—and put us in the basket.

“The ropes used to tie down the balloon were then cut. And the most fantastic adventure that any Earthly creature could embark upon began for the three of us—and the King was there watching, wide-eyed! Everything looked so small and insignificant! Even the men—usually so menacing and clumsy with their long legs—looked no larger than small ants. Franz, trying to look blasé, couldn’t refrain from making nasty comments, and Hubert, fascinated by the breathtaking scenery, chomped on the rooster’s wing to quiet him down a bit. There wasn’t a sound, not a peep! We watched the Earth float slowly by below us. After a few minutes, Hubert raised his head and saw that the air inside the balloon had cooled down. Franz, who was perched on the edge of the basket, told us that we were getting closer to the ground. ‘Logical’, I thought. ‘The hot air, which is so light, is cooling down’. We got heavier and heavier as the balloon lost heat. In just a few minutes, when the balloon had cooled down completely, we would land.

“To our sadness, that is exactly what happened. We touched down softly in a field, three-and-a-half kilometres from where we started, as we later learned. The experience didn’t keep Hubert from looking for a tasty plot of grass to help him get over the emotion of it all. Franz complained about his hurt wing. As for me, my head was still up in the clouds, and all I could think about was going back up.

“Suddenly, the venerable old men who had been standing around the King back at the chateau started coming towards us from all directions. Red-faced and breathless, they were talking very quickly and feverishly writing things down on the paper they had brought with them. The Montgolfier brothers finally arrived, and they received warm congratulations from the old men. Barnabé told us later that the men were members of the famous Academy of Sciences and that they were the authors of the thick book the brothers had been reading. From that day onward, the brothers were in that book—and others would be able to read about their fantastic experiment.

“Franz, Hubert and I felt like celebrated heroes that had just made an incredible discovery. Oh, how we wanted to go back up in the balloon, to float among the winds and the clouds and laugh at the tiny little world beneath us. Unfortunately for us, we were soon replaced by men. Imagine the amazing possibilities that this invention gave those two-legged creatures that Mother Nature had bound to the Earth!

“Well, my duckies, a few days after our memorable adventure, on 21 November, for the first time ever, a man flew over the Earth’s surface. But that is another story”.

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