

If only the wind hadn't changed direction ...

But it was thrilling! I was free and fearless! ...

I have heard myself described as small and ugly, with sharp and bird-like features, and how I am of an extremely nervous disposition. Well, it's true that I am easily startled, and frightened by loud noises, and I'm terrified of riding in a carriage. But my husband, Jean-Pierre, was a balloonist and not a good business man, and in 1804 we were on the verge of bankruptcy. So we came up with a plan that a female balloonist would be something of a novelty and might attract enough attention to resolve our financial situation.

I will never forget our first flight together: it was an incomparable sensation. One of our early joint flights resulted in a crash: Jean-Pierre suffered a head injury and the shock of it left me mute for quite some time.

In 1809 and still terribly in debt, my husband died and I became the first woman to pilot her own balloon and adopt ballooning as a career. To minimise expenses, I had to be as frugal as possible when it came to my choice of balloon, so I used a hydrogen-filled gas balloon as it allowed me to ascend in a basket that was really little more and no bigger than a chair! ... And because I was small and light, I was able to cut back on the amount of gas needed to inflate the balloon.

Well, I was certainly a novelty! Ballooning had become a very popular spectator sport in Europe and drew huge crowds. Still living in France, I became a favourite of Napoleon and he made me aeronaut of the official festivals. He then made me his Chief Air Minister of Ballooning and I was required to draw up plans for an aerial invasion of England! ... I was able to dissuade him from this, pointing out that it was neither practical nor sensible, and that the prevailing winds over The Channel would make such an invasion almost impossible.

At the birth of Napoleon's son, I took a balloon flight over Paris and threw out leaflets proclaiming his birth; and made an ascent in bad weather over Naples with Napoleon's brother-in-law, the King of Naples reviewing the troops.

I gave many displays in Europe but always preferred to fly at night. In 1811, I flew from Naples to Rome and ascended to a height of 12,000 feet, whereupon I fell into a profound sleep. I also lost consciousness on another occasion when I had to ascend to a similar altitude to avoid a

hailstorm and spent fourteen and a half hours in the air as a result! I flew over The Alps and, when the temperature dropped below freezing, I had nose-bleeds and icicles formed on my face and hands. And I almost drowned when I mistook a marshy field for a safe landing-spot. On another occasion, I landed in a forest where I had to spend the night; in the morning a crowd of locals approached me reverently, believing me to be an apparition of the blessed virgin!

I performed regularly at the Tivoli Gardens in Paris and had added another element to my flights: a spectacular firework display at every ascent, which I ignited and launched from the chair. I was warned this could be dangerous ...

I was wearing a white dress and a white bonnet with ostrich plumes, the wind was blowing strongly and I had to shed ballast to get some lift. Once I had cleared the tree tops, I lit the display and the balloon was illuminated by baskets containing Bengal fire, a slow-burning brightly- coloured pyrotechnic. It must have looked spectacular! I was sailing through clouds when I realised I was making a rapid descent. The balloon got caught by the wind and the spectators cheered and applauded this change of direction. Gas had begun escaping from the balloon so I shed more ballast to slow the descent - and stayed quite calm.

Above the rooftops of the Rue de Provence, the gas was exhausted and I struck the roof of a house. The ropes holding the chair to the body of the balloon had burnt through and I got caught up in the netting and - pitched over the side of the roof into the street below.

My death proved a cautionary tale, either as an example of a woman exceeding her station (as with *[American poet and lawyer]* Grenville Mellen who said: 'A woman in a balloon is either out of her element or too high in it.') - or as the price of vanity for attempting the spectacular.

I remember saying, just before take-off - so I suppose these will be remembered as my last words - 'Let's go! This will be for the last time.'

**Sophie Blanchard, 1778 – 1819**

**Cate Fowler**