



HANG ON, DOLLY!

BY SALLY LEE

ELIZABETH

“DOLLY”

SHEPHERD loved

adventure. But growing up as a tomboy in England in the 1890s did not fit the mold of a “proper” young lady. Girls were expected to stay in the background while their brothers received better educations and enjoyed

more freedom. But while other young girls were learning homemaking

skills and social graces, Dolly was chasing her brother up trees, sliding down drainpipes, or doing acrobatics on a clothesline. She even accepted her brother’s dare to jump off a roof while holding an umbrella. It was her first time jumping from a high place. It wouldn’t be her last.

There were no airplanes in the skies when Dolly was growing up. The heavens were left to the clouds and huge balloons puffed up with smoke or

Dolly, holding on to her trapeze bar and straddling the sling attached to her chute, awaits liftoff. That’s her picture on the balloon.

gas. People were fascinated to see the enormous balloons floating overhead, piloted by daring sportsmen or wealthy hobbyists, but few felt brave enough to ride in one. Aerial showmen took advantage of this fascination with danger. Daredevils thrilled crowds by parachuting from high-flying balloons. These acts were exciting enough when performed by men. But the biggest thrill came from watching female aerialists boldly risk their lives.

Dolly was sixteen years old in 1903. She had grown into a young woman full of self-confidence and a mind of her own. She hadn't given much thought to balloons until she took a job as a waitress at the Alexander Palace. It was London's largest entertainment complex, attracting as many as a hundred thousand people for special events such as carnivals, concerts, and horse races. On summer weekends huge crowds gathered to watch the balloons and the daring parachutists.

Dolly enjoyed getting to know the people she waited on. One regular customer was Auguste Gaudron. He led a team of parachutists that performed at fairs and festivals all around England. Gaudron gave Dolly a tour of his workshop. She asked so many questions about the balloons and parachutes that he finally asked if she would like to make a parachute descent. She immediately answered, "Yes!"

It was a year before Gaudron followed through on his invitation. Seventeen-year-old Dolly didn't know she was replacing a girl on Gaudron's team who had been critically injured.

On the appointed day, thousands of spectators filled the grounds of the Alexander Palace.

Butterflies fluttered in Dolly's stomach as she made her way through the crowd. A monstrous gas-filled balloon loomed ahead, tugging at its ropes as if it were trying to escape.

Gaudron led Dolly and four passengers to the basket. Dolly stepped into the sling, a long strip of webbing that formed a loop attached to the parachute. About six inches wide, the sling passed between her legs and would carry her weight during her descent. Her right hand clutched a trapeze bar that hung from her parachute. Holding it over her head would keep her upright as she dropped. Dolly's heart raced as she perched on the edge of the basket with her feet dangling over the side. She wrapped her left arm around the ropes that attached the basket to the balloon.

"Hands . . . OFF!" Gaudron ordered.

The men holding the basket stepped back, and the balloon lifted into the air. It was Dolly's first balloon ride, and she watched in fascination as the ground fell away beneath her. Buildings grew smaller and fields merged into a patchwork quilt. Cheers from the crowd faded into silence.

"We are over 2,000 feet. Get ready to jump," Gaudron said. Dolly looked down at her landing spot. The patch of green looked no larger than a handkerchief.

"GO!" signaled Gaudron.

Dolly took a deep breath and jumped. Her parachute, tied to the balloon by a light rope, broke free. Dolly's body plunged toward the earth like a speeding rock. She felt a mixture of fright and exhilaration as the ground rushed toward her. Dolly gripped the trapeze bar with both hands, knowing that if she let go

AERIALISTS ARE HUMAN BEANS WHO PERFORM DANGEROUS STUNTS HIGH IN THE AIR, LIKE SWINGING ON A TRAPEZE OR WALKING ON AN AIRPLANE WING.



AWAY WE GO! . . .
WOOD!





she could
topple
backward and
fall to her death.

Moments later
Dolly felt a reassuring
tug on her arms as her
parachute billowed to life.
It slowed her fall and carried
her gently back to earth. Her first
aerial adventure had been a glorious
success. Dolly was hooked!

Dolly worked hard to learn every-
thing she could about balloons and
parachuting. She finally proved to
Gaudron that she had enough strength,
courage, and good
judgment to make
a solo ascent. Her
parachute was
attached to the
bottom of a bal-
loon. There was
no basket, just
a sling and the
trapeze bar
for support.
Gaudron was
not there
to give her
instructions.
Dolly was
completely
on her own.

“Let go!” Dolly ordered. The bal-
loon whisked her off her feet and carried
her into the silent sky. It was like walking
on air. Dolly picked her landing site, pulled
the ripping cord to release her parachute from
the balloon, and floated back to earth.

Dolly didn’t dwell on the danger of her
jumps. Occasionally, a team member “disap-
peared,” but no one talked about it. If asked,
Gaudron would only say that the person had
“left the team.” Dolly wasn’t worried about
being killed. That was something that hap-
pened to other people, not her. Still, not all of
her landings were perfect. Some were merely
painful, like landing in a tree or on a barbed
wire fence. But other times Dolly admitted to
coming “within a whisker of death.”

One frightening evening, Dolly’s parachute
wouldn’t release from the balloon. Dolly hung
on to the bar helplessly as she rose higher and
drifted farther. She knew gas would eventu-
ally leak out of the balloon, and it would come
down on its own. But could she hang on that
long? The altimeter on her wrist told her that
she had risen above 12,000 feet. Her arms
ached, and her hands were numb from the
cold. If she lost her grip, she would plunge to
her death. She held on into the night, sing-
ing her father’s favorite hymns to keep calm.
More than three hours later, the balloon
came down thirty-five miles from where
she’d started.

This experience would have fright-
ened off most people. But not Dolly. She
had no way of knowing that her most
terrifying trip lay ahead.

Dolly ascends above the crowd.

Dolly's friend, Louie May, wanted to try parachuting. Gaudron agreed to let her make a descent. When Louie's balloon developed a problem, Gaudron suggested that Dolly and Louie make a double descent. Two parachutes were attached to Dolly's balloon. The friends lifted off together, much to the crowd's delight.

"I wouldn't have missed this for *anything!*" Louie said as they swung gently beneath the rising balloon.

When they reached 3,000 feet it was time to detach the parachutes and jump away. Louie pulled her ripping cord. Nothing happened. She yanked it several more times, but her parachute held fast to the balloon.

"What shall I do? I can't get away," Louie cried.

Dolly kept her voice calm, but inside she knew they were in trouble. "Hang on, Louie! Whatever you do—hang on! The gas will seep out, and we shall come down eventually."

The balloon soared higher and passed through a wet bank of clouds. When it came into the light again, the ground had disappeared. Only a thick carpet of clouds lay below them. Terror filled Louie's eyes.

"Don't look down," Dolly ordered. "Keep looking *up*."

Dolly could have pulled away to save herself, but the thought never occurred to her. She knew she had to do something fast. Louie's lips were already turning blue from the cold. She wouldn't be able to hang on until the balloon descended on its own. Their only hope was for both of them to come down on Dolly's parachute. Dolly knew no one had ever accomplished that before.

Dolly kept her voice calm, but her mind raced, trying to figure out what to do. First, Louie would have to climb out of her sling and hang onto Dolly. One slip would send her plummeting two miles to certain death.

"Hold my bar with one hand, and keep holding yours with the other," Dolly told Louie. "Take your legs out of the sling and put them round my waist, one at a time."

Clinging to both bars, Louie wrapped her legs around Dolly's waist tighter than a vise. Then, carefully, she let go of her bar and grabbed onto Dolly's with both hands. But in that position, Dolly could not reach the ripping cord to release her chute.

"Louie, you'll have to put your arms round my neck," Dolly said. Then she felt Louie's full weight pulling on her arms.

Dolly was worried. Would there be too much weight for one parachute? Would her sling hold the weight of two people? Would they be able to reach the ground before the strength in her arms gave out?

"If you've never said a prayer before, say one now," Dolly told Louie. "And hold tightly. I'm going to pull away . . . NOW!"

Dolly pulled her ripping cord, and they dropped from the balloon. Louie's grip tightened around Dolly. Their speed picked up as they plunged toward the ground. Waiting for the parachute to open was agonizing. It finally billowed to life, but only halfway.

"We're all right, Louie! The chute has opened . . . just hang on now." But Dolly knew they were falling much too fast under the half-opened parachute. Hitting the ground at that speed would kill them both. All they could see



GODDNES!
THIS IS
TIRING.
DOLLY
MUST HAVE
BEEN VERY
STRONG!

HELP! I'M LOSING MY
GRIP! I CAN'T HOLD ON!



WHOA, WATCH WHERE
YOU'RE GOING!



Dolly poses in her parachuting costume around 1911.

below were clouds. They didn't know whether they were over land or water, forest or village.

When they broke through the clouds, they saw open countryside below. The parachute opened the rest of the way, but Dolly knew they were still dropping too

fast. Dolly slammed into the ground. Louie landed on top of her.

Louie jumped up unhurt. Dolly didn't move.

Dolly didn't know it, but she had just made the world's first midair rescue. But it came at a price. The hard landing injured her back and left her paralyzed. The family that owned the farm where the two women landed rushed to her rescue. With the help of doctors, the family cared for Dolly at their home for nearly two months.

Dolly was devastated when the doctor told her she would never walk again. She was only twenty-one, and after having been so active, Dolly couldn't imagine spending the rest of her life in a wheelchair. Another doctor tried an experimental treatment by applying electric shocks to her back. Between the unusual treatments and Dolly's determination, she learned to walk again. But that wasn't enough. Dolly wanted to get back to parachuting.


Just eight weeks after her accident, Dolly was back in the sky. She wouldn't admit to anyone how frightened she was. But as she

drifted through the silence, the familiar thrill returned. She only became nervous when she began falling back to earth. A jarring landing could reinjure her back. She shouldn't have worried. Her landing was perfect.

Dolly continued performing for four more years. She quit one day in 1912, at age twenty-five. Alone in the silent sky, she claims to have heard a voice say, "Don't come up again or you will be killed." She never made another jump.

As one of England's most daring and popular woman parachutists, Dolly became a role model to women who, at that time, were considered weaker and less courageous than men. During an era when social classes rarely mixed, Dolly made friends with people from all walks of life. Women poured out their troubles to her, and she accepted invitations to have tea in their homes. To fans, Dolly was more than a performer. She was their friend.

When World War I broke out two years later, Dolly volunteered as a driver and mechanic on the battlefields in France. During the London Blitz of World War II, she managed over a hundred underground shelters that kept thousands of people safe during nightly bombings.

Dolly died in 1983 at the age of 96, having lived a full and adventurous life. She wrote in her autobiography, "I never lost that sense of wonderment and ecstasy whenever I floated alone in the awesome silence . . . When I soared upwards, above all earthly worries and discomforts, my mind was set free to wander at will and to absorb the sensations of gentle flight, and the beauty of everything around and below me." 

I KNEW YOU CARED!
YOU CAUGHT ME.



... YOU RAN INTO ME, MORE LIKE. PLUS YOU
WEREN'T VERY HIGH OFF THE GROUND...