A very tall man, with an interminable neck, who wore round spectacles and a Basque beret, Auguste Piccard became the model for Professor Cuthbert Calculus, the head-in-the-clouds scientist in the popular "The Adventures of Tintin" comic books, written by the Belgian cartoonist Hergé in the 1930s. Decades later, he inspired Gene Roddenberry, the creator of "Star Trek" the show and its other incarnations, to name the captain of the Starship Enterprise Jean-Luc Picard (played by Patrick Stewart).

Although it is little remembered now, in 1931, Piccard, a Swiss-born professor of physics, flew higher than anyone before him in a spherical, pressurized, aluminum balloon he had helped design. A year later, he broke his own record.

In 1960, Jacques Piccard, his son, left the field of economics to become one of the first human beings to explore the deepest point on the surface of the Earth's crust, in the Mariana Trench in the Pacific Ocean, in a submersible vehicle, the bathyscaphe, he built with Auguste. And in 1999, Auguste's grandson, Bertrand Piccard, a psychiatrist, became the first person to make a nonstop balloon flight around the globe.

In "The Explorer Gene," his first book, Tom Cheshire, associate editor of the United Kingdom edition of Wired magazine, provides a spirited chronicle of the dangerous adventures that became the Piccard family business. Drawn predominantly from memoirs written by his three principal subjects and interviews with Bertrand, who will attempt to go around the world in a solar-powered airplane in 2015, Cheshire's book seeks to capture the Piccards' "spirit and passion for discovery."

"The Explorer Gene" contains charming stories that illuminate the personalities of the Piccards. For his first flight, Cheshire writes, Auguste chose to depart from Augsburg, Germany, where his balloon had been built. When German authorities refused to grant him a certificate of airworthiness because his craft had never been flown before, he turned to his native Switzerland for a permit. When German authorities refused to grant him a certificate of airworthiness because his craft had never been flown before, he turned to his native Switzerland for a permit. When German authorities refused to grant him a certificate of airworthiness because his craft had never been flown before, he turned to his native Switzerland for a permit. Cheshire concludes that although most of us prefer to stay on the ground, "[w]e all have explorer genes," which we can use even if we don't have the pluck of the Piccards. Happily, like most old chestnuts, this one contains more than a grain of truth.

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