

Chapter 2 - Hot Air Balloons

I rolled over onto my back and groaned.

I had forgotten just how hard, floors could be. I reflected that sleeping on expensive mattresses for too many years had irretrievably softened my once resilient and robust body.

'They tend to make floors much harder nowadays,' commented Mike the evening before.

'Which is why you made up that rubbish about having back trouble so that you could monopolise the only real bed,' I grumbled.

'Alun, could have left you the inflatable mattresses,' replied Mike.

'Hey,' cried Alun, 'remember I had an injection in my buttock yesterday. It's not my fault if it's still sore.'

'One in the morning was only just yesterday,' I grumbled. 'But it still was your fault that you got your leg caught in a rusty barbed wire fence and then remembered that your tetanus vaccination was years out of date,' I complained.

'I didn't see it in the dark.'

'You can't see an out-of-date vaccination, even in broad daylight,' Mike contributed.

'Very amusing,' sneered Alun.

'If you hadn't decided to take a short cut across the fields in the pitch black,' I reminded him, 'you wouldn't have come across that obstacle at all.'

Alun sighed, 'I thought I had the lay of the land pretty well memorised.'

'You only looked at the map for a few moments,' Mike shook his head.

'I've got a remarkable visual memory,' he complained, 'you all know that.'

'That's true, but it only really works properly when a pub's involved.' I added.

Mike grumbled, 'Well your remarkable visual memory didn't spot that filthy ditch either.'

Alun winced, 'No I have to admit that that came as a bit of a surprise.'

'Perhaps that was because we were nowhere near where we were supposed to be,' I suggested.

'I wonder where we were then,' mused Alun. 'I'll have to check that out on the map.'

Needless to say, the girls found the entire episode highly entertaining when we eventually got back and explained it to them. Even though it was eleven-o'clock, they packed us off to the hospital where we spent three hours in A&E waiting for Alun to have his vaccination jab.

All this came back to me as I tried to find a position in which an as-yet unbruised part of my body could take my weight.

Then, the noise which had woken me was repeated, and I raised myself on my elbow.

'Mike. Can't you stop that?'

There was a grumbling sound, 'It isn't me it's Alun.'

'Hey,' called Alun, 'not me.'

'Well, what the hell's making all that hissing noise?'

'Hell!' cried Alun jumping up. He opened the windows and throwing back the shutters cursed, 'Christ! Is it that late?'

We jumped up and joined him.

As far as the eye could see, the sky was full of huge multi-coloured hot-air balloons.

A few of these had been lucky or very smart and were already so high that their markings could hardly be made out. Others were already past the house and disappearing down the valley towards Grenoble.

However, the vast majority were spread out across the valley at various heights and heading in multiple directions.

The hissing noise which woke us came from the powerful gas burners whenever they were fired-up to lift the balloons.

Pilots were struggling to get their balloon up out of the cold ground mist into the early morning sun. However, even at this time of year, the sun took its time in climbing above the Belledonne mountain peaks. As soon as it did, its rays would immediately heat the balloon surfaces, warm the gas and thus lift them to where ascensional air currents might be found.

We were cramped up together in this small bedroom, near Grenoble, because we had come to watch this colourful spectacle.

Thanks to its exceptional geographical situation, the alpine village of Saint-Hillaire-du-Touvet, has been home to a world-class para-gliding meeting for many years. Less than a hundred yards from the village centre, the narrow alpine plateau abruptly drops vertically to the valley floor three thousand five hundred feet below. Furthermore, not a hundred yards behind the village, the mountains soar an impressive seven thousand feet. These vertiginous cliffs are the ramparts of the Chartreuse mountain range. As such, they form a south-facing flat-topped barrier, nearly eighteen miles long, bordering the valley running from Grenoble to Chambéry.

This special topography gives rise some of the strongest ascensional air currents around, and above all provides several incredible take-off sites.

The event traditionally opens early on Saturday morning with an impressive flight of hot-air balloons.

Luckily, my wife's sister owned a house only half a mile downwind from the take-off point and, after a little persuasion, agreed to put us all up for two nights.

Due to the position of the house, all the balloons came more or less over the house. Those that did not boast a sufficiently experienced pilot to find an ascensional air current landed in the grounds of the chateau which backed onto her garden.

So, cursing at having overslept, we dressed hastily and dashed down into the back garden to join the others. Groups of excited children were already rushing about screaming at each other. Several parents had climbed the fences and were standing out in the middle of the field to get a better view.

A three-dimensional ocean of multi-coloured bubbles flowed along the valley towards us, growing larger and larger as they approached. Some were already so high that they appeared only as little colourful specks in the sky. Others seemed to have hardly moved from their starting positions and now were far behind the leaders. The vast majority were drifting towards us, spreading out across the flat, mile-wide valley floor at various heights

'Christ,' cried Alun, 'I never realised that those things were so huge.'

'Or quite so noisy,' I shouted as the one nearest us fired his gas burner.

A bright blue one, with a yellow star printed on it, was coming down sedately into the grounds at the far end, having given up the struggle.

The children, spotting this, swarmed off toward it, leaving an oasis of peace and quiet behind them.

'There's a small lake behind those trees over there,' nodded my sister in law, 'You have to keep well clear of that area. If your balloon gets too close, you'll end up in trouble.'

'I'll try to remember that, next time I balloon this way,' Smiled Alun. 'As it happens, Margaux was thinking of buying me one for Christmas.' He nodded, 'She says they're more stable than hang-gliders.'

'Less dangerous, in the hands of incompetents,' was what I said if my memory is correct,' said Margaux.

'The advantage,' I added, 'is that Mike and I could come in it with you, Alun.'

'And keep an eye on things to make sure nothing went wrong.' added Mike, who was now warming to the idea.

'Oh god!' sighed Margaux, 'that's precisely why things do go wrong. Because you three simply *are* keeping an eye on things.'

'And drinking,' added my wife. Now where she got that idea from, heaven knows.

'It would be fantastic,' cried Alun ignoring this, 'We could try to balloon across the entire length of France from Normandy all the way down to Saint Tropez. Now that would be a good project, don't you think?'

'And why not take a few paying passengers too?' smiled my wife.

'Yes, brilliant idea,' nodded Mike, impervious to the joke, 'no lack of space for beer either,' he volunteered.

'And wine,' I added.

'Naturally.'

'They would have to be men though,' nodded Mike gravely.

'What, the hell are you talking about Mike?'

'He means the wines, perhaps,' I suggested.

'The passengers. They would have to be men.'

'Why? Girls would be good fun.'

'Forget girls,' snorted Margaux.

'Why, Mike?' I frowned.

'Because of the peeing. Men can pee over the side, but girls can't.'

We all paused as we took in this unexpected bit of foresight.

'You seem to know a great deal about women, for an unmarried man,' said my wife, with a stifled laugh.

'Stands to reason,' he retorted, blushing, 'doesn't it.'

'Yes, I agree. It's all about standing,' smiled my wife.

'So, girls are off the agenda then,' said Mike.

'Pity, that,' I frowned.

'Mind you,' said Alun, 'we could devise some sort of hole in the bottom of the basket.'

'Or we could strap a toilet seat to the outside of the basket.' I added.

'Forget the girls,' scowled Margaux, 'and forget the damn balloon as well while you're about it.'

'Mind you,' I said, 'that trip of yours might take a few weeks if the wind wasn't right.'

My wife was wearing one of her wry smiles as she observed Margaux bridling, 'Oh, come on. You'd get lost and end up in Ghana.' she said, 'and inevitably end up in prison.'

‘Ghana?’ frowned Mike.

‘You’d end up in prison, even if it wasn’t Ghana.’

‘But Ghana isn’t in that direction at all,’ frowned Mike.

‘Prison is in any direction you choose to take,’ grumbled Margaux.

Well, ending up in prison was indeed something the three of us had had quite a lot of experience of doing. We exchanged looks and pulled faces at each other.

‘We’d never get lost anyway.’ Said Alun. ‘From up there, you can see everything.’ He nodded, ‘It’s like having the entire Ordinance Survey map laid out below you all the time.’

‘You three don’t need to get lost to end up in prison.’ sighed Margaux.

We reflected on the truth of this remark, but Mike was not to be put off by negative thoughts.

‘Yes. Exactly Alun’s right,’ he agreed with enthusiasm, ‘likening the aerial view to looking down on a map is excellent. There might be trouble if there was fog or clouds though,’ he said.

‘Shut up,’ said Alun.

‘And particularly, of course,’ sighed Margaux, ‘when all three of you are lying drunk at the bottom of the basket.’

‘Even then, they could still keep an eye on the lie of the land by looking down through the ladies pee hole,’ scoffed Margaux.

‘Oh Hell, Margaux,’ cried Alun, ‘who do you take us for. A bunch of inexperienced kids?’

‘That’s about it,’ nodded Margaux. ‘What do you think?’ this was directed at my wife.

‘Over-confident, over-adventurous and totally unconscious of the risks involved,’ nodded my wife.

'More often unconscious because of the drink I'd say.' sniffed Margaux.

'Ha, ha,' scowled Alun.

Suddenly, Mike piped up, as if the preceding criticisms about our competence had not been voiced, 'What about refuelling?'

Alun shook his head, 'No trouble, we could fill up with wine anywhere we came down.'

'I meant gas.'

'Oh, Gas! Yes, I suppose that would come from any domestic gas bottle supplier. Garages, supermarkets, and so on.'

'What happens if it rains?' frowned Mike.

'Shut up, you three,' cried Margaux in exasperation. 'You are not having a hot-air balloon.'

'But I thought...' Alun's voice trailed off as he took in Margaux's steady and eminently dangerous gaze.

'Ditch the idea,' she grumbled.

'They're very safe,' I said.

'Shut up.'

'And stable,' added Alun.

'Do you know,' nodded Mike, 'I rather like the idea. I think I'll look into it when I get home.'

'Oh, don't bother, Mike,' said Alun, 'I'll probably be able to pick one up cheap, second hand.'

Mike and I stiffened, 'Don't you ever dare. Alun. Don't even dream about it.' I cried.

'Tip-Scavenger, that's what I call you.' Snorted Mike.

'Oh, come on!'

'Oh no, we are not coming on at all. We happen to remember vividly what happened on the way down to Croatia.'

‘That was an accident.’

‘The accident was that the trailer came from your local tip and the car hook, from another. This, if you remember, resulted in the family luggage ending up in the river.’

That was because of your reckless driving, Mike,’ snorted Alun.

‘And then, what about the episode in Normandy with the cheep ex-rental windsurf board and the mast you “found”.’

‘Oh, come on! That was just a spot of bad luck,’ cried Alun indignantly.

‘Maybe, but that sort of bad luck is already a little inconvenient when one is at ground level. What about when you’re three-thousand feet up.’

I smiled, ‘One would have to choose one’s tip carefully.’

‘Yes,’ Alun brightened, ‘Not all tips are equal.’

Margaux snorted, ‘will you three just stop talking rot. Listen to me, please. You are not having a hot-air balloon, either brand new or off the nearest fully-certified balloon tip.’ She glared, ‘Forget balloons, got that?’

Mike pulled a face, ‘I could still just have a quick look around to see what a good one would cost.’

‘If you do,’ scowled Margaux, ‘we girls will never invite you to visit us again.’

Mike’s face dropped, ‘you wouldn’t do that?’

‘Never,’ repeated Margaux, prodding his shoulder.

‘Hey. That hurts.’ Mike grumbled.

‘Never ever,’ added my wife with a little smile.

Mike’s mouth fell open as his mind grasped the consequences of such a devastating event.

‘You wouldn’t do that?’ he gasped.

'I would.'

My wife looked at him and smiled a tender sort of smile, 'Mind you, Margaux. We could always consider letting them have a tethered one.'

Margaux frowned at her friend.

'Then, when they get a little too much under our feet, we could pack them into it with some wine and float them up a few thousand feet.'

'Yesss,' nodded Margaux, 'Good idea. Then they'd be out of the way, AND, we'd know exactly where they were.'

'Exactly.'

'No big-bosomed barmaids to worry about either?'

'Perfect,' smiled my wife.

She turned to Mike, 'Check out the availability of very-long tether ropes first, Mike.'

'I believe they're special steel cables rather than ropes,' smiled Mike, 'but I'll have a look.'

'Good man!'

My sister-in-law frowned at Margaux and shook her head uncomprehending.

By some quirk of nature, the sisters had been born with a slightly different molecular arrangement of their ADN. In fact, I suspect that in her case, nature had entirely skipped the segment responsible for sense of humour. No doubt she had considered that those few molecules could be put to better use elsewhere in her organism. I have yet to discover where they ended up, but I suppose that nature knows best.

Anyway, she then went on from where we had interrupted her earlier as if nothing had happened.

'The lake water keeps the early morning air cold, and somehow causes it to fall nearby,' she smiled.

‘So, the balloons end up down in the field, whatever the real reason.’ I suggested.

‘They get trapped,’ added Mike.

‘Exactly,’ she nodded, ‘sometimes they end up in the lake too.’

‘That must be fun,’ murmured Alun, ‘that would never happen to us, we’ll be more careful.’

‘You won’t have to be careful,’ sighed Margaux, ‘because there is no way on Earth that you three are going to have a hot-air balloon.’

‘Not even a teeny-weeny one?’ moaned Alun.

‘Do shut up, Alun,’ she sighed.

We were just turning to follow the children to see the landing balloon from closer quarters when the roar of a burner from close behind us span us all around.

‘Oh Hell,’ shouted Alun.

‘Christ!’ cried, Mike.

Search as I would, no satisfying verbal exclamation came to me. Consequently, I had to content myself merely with gaping open-mouthed, which was far less satisfying.

Anyway, one of the other balloons had been following the valley, closer-in to the cliff face than advisable. Luckily for them, however, the wind had shifted. It was now driving its massive coloured volume away from the rock wall towards the valley floor.

This was undoubtedly excellent news for the passengers. However, as the balloon was swept out of reach of the dangerous jagged rocks, the slight lift it had been getting from the rising air currents failed, and it began to fall.

It soon became apparent that it was now headed straight for the field, which again was good news for the four people standing in the heavy willow basket.

Unfortunately, however, between the balloon and the security of the welcoming field, stood an obstacle. This was our house and above all, its roof.

'Hells bells' cried Mike, 'That basket thing will drag half the roof off if it hits it.'

Starting off at top speed, he called, 'come on. Let's get up on the roof and ward it off.'

We didn't wait to be ordered by the girls as we would usually have done but flew off as fast as we could go.

Alun got his leg gashed by the barbed wire fence again, but we carried on regardless of his cursing. After all, he was adequately vaccinated now.

'Shut up, Alun,' shouted Mike, 'children and women are con hear you.'

'I was swearing in English. They're French.'

'They learn English swear words in primary school over here nowadays,' I added as we dashed into the house, and up the stairs, 'otherwise they wouldn't be able to understand American films.'

'They only need three or four words for that,' panted back Alun, which was not all that far from the truth.

The house had a big mezzanine, and from here a large roof-window gave access to the tiled surface outside...

Mike dragged a chair over, jumped up and pushed open the window, and we clambered up onto the tiles and scrambled up the slope to the ridge.

'The damn thing's coming straight at us,' cried Mike staring at the colossal approaching ball.

'The guy driving the thing seems to have got the same idea.' I added, screwing my eyes up and staring.

'Oh,' nodded Alun, balancing himself on the ridge tiles, 'I wondered why he was waving like that. Oh. By the way, are you sure that they "drive" balloons?'

'Shut up, Alun,' shouted Mike. 'Let's get down as close to the gutter as possible. If he comes in too low, we'll just have to try and hold back the basket and walk it along sideways and off the side of the house.'

There was a new roar as the man in charge set off the burners again in a vain attempt to gain enough height to overshoot us.

'He can't leave the flame burning much longer, or he'll burn a hole through the top, and the thing will come down like a ton of bricks.'

'Oh, Hell!' I shouted, 'straight on top of my new car.'

Alun nodded and seemed to find this idea amusing.

'Come on, you two,' called Mike working his way carefully downwards across the tiles, 'Try not to slip over the edge.' He turned, 'Whatever you do, don't put a foot on the guttering. It can't be relied on to hold.'

'Our fall would be broken by that nice soft car roof down there though,' he smiled.

'Very funny,' I sneered.

'God in heaven,' cried Alun, 'look at the size of that damn basket. It must weigh a ton.'

'That's why we're up here, you idiot,' shouted Mike as the contraption came closer.

'Why the hell do they make them out of willow? Why don't they make them out of carbon fibre? They'd weigh next to nothing then,' snorted Alun.

'They ought to make the passengers out of carbon fibre too.' I added, 'that would save a lot of weight.'

'I wonder if they can carry much in the way of wine?' mused Alun.

'You've got a point there,' nodded Mike, 'these guys are French after all.'

'Maybe it's not gas, they're burning at all but distilled pear cordial, or something like that,' said Alun.

'Yes,' I agreed, 'dual-purpose fuel. Good idea that. Ingenious and very French.'

However, at this moment, the pilot sent another deafening burst of flame into the open belly of the balloon, and amazingly the whole thing rose a few feet.

'It's still going to hit us,' cried Mike. 'Ready?'

'Yeh,' we shouted back.

The impressive basket swept nearer, but suddenly something unexpected happened.

Two of the passengers heaved themselves up onto the side of the basket, and as it reached the edge of the roof, they leapt towards us.

I grabbed the first one to avoid him going over the side and onto my new car, and the other landed like a cat and scrambled up the tiles to safety.

The one I grabbed and held tightly was surprisingly squashier than I expected. Especially around the upper regions.

Regardless of this, I put all my energy into the task of saving a human life. I pushed upward, and the two of us fell back onto the tiles and scrambled to safety.

Alun and Mike held the basket off as well as they could and ran it along, parallel to the roof.

Having jettisoned a hundred and fifty kilos, the basket rose to the height of the ridge.

‘The chimney.’ Shouted Mike. ‘If it hits that, the structure will go straight through the roof.’

‘Or maybe slide down onto that nice new car down there,’ smiled Alun.

‘Shut up,’ I shouted.

I scrambled back, and we all tried to push the basket away from the chimney. Happily, we were successful because there were now five of us, and the balloon was still rising.

However, as the heavy basket grazed past the brickwork of the chimney, we heard an ominous metallic grating sound. This was followed by a shout from Mike, now hidden from us on the far side of the basket.

‘Oh Balls,’ he cried, ‘the satellite dish.’

This was followed by a series of odd tearing noises. Immediately after, the basket freed itself and swept away following the balloon, which had taken advantage of the delay to gain a few precious yards.

The dish went with it. The down-cable followed it and seemed to stretch and stretch, far more than any of us would have thought possible.

Then with a decidedly unmusical twang, the white wire snapped to release the balloon to bound away across the field.

We all let up a cry and slapped each other on the shoulder.

It was at this precise moment that we discovered that Mike was no longer amongst the back slappers.

Looking back at the balloon, we made out a pair of legs dangling below the far side of the basket.

Then something round and white detached itself and plummeted down into the field.

The satellite dish and balloon had parted company.

The man driving the balloon was by then frantically doing something leaning over the far side of the basket. Suddenly he fell over backwards and disappeared into the basket, followed by a shape which, even from a distance, looked very much like a Mike.

'Hell,' I gasped, 'that was a close one.'

'You're telling me,' agreed Alun.

'Oh ho.' Exclaimed one of our new companions, who turned out to be a girl, 'They're headed straight for those trees now.'

'Oh.' I gasped, realising why the body I had clasped had felt so squashy, 'sorry.'

'I'll survive.' She smiled, and I do believe I blushed.

Anyway, as they were headed straight for the trees, we all squeezed ourselves back down through the roof window. I, of course, just had to catch the girl as she fell backwards off the chair and experienced the same warm squishiness for a second time.

The girl looked at me with a wry smile.

'Life's odd sometimes, isn't it' she said and set off down the stairs at a run.

By the time we emerged from the house and had jumped the fence, the balloon had risen slightly. The basket was now brushing through the tops of the tall pine trees.

Our headlong pursuit was only interrupted by a cry calling us back and untangle Alun from the barbed wire again. As we ran towards the hidden lake my sister in law pulled a sad face and shook her head, 'The lake awaits,' she said with a sigh.

'Mike's in that thing now.' I cried as we sprinted past the girls.

'That was to be expected,' sighed Margaux.

As we stumbled across the field, the progress of the balloon seemed to slow down and then it began to disappear gracefully from sight behind the tall trees.

'Is that an effect of perspective?' panted Mike, 'or are they falling?'

'Perspective goes slower than that unless you're a fighter jet.' I cried.

'Or a UFO,' added Alun.

As we reached the trees, Alun, who was several yards ahead of us, discovered a new barbed wire fence. We disentangled him once more and set off again.

His trousers were by now torn to shreds, but even the thought of what Margaux was going to say could not hold him back.

We dashed through the undergrowth and came out of the band of trees to witness an unforgettable scene.

The enormous multi-coloured balloon had ceased its onward progression and was now gently descending towards the tiny lake.

Even though the lake was no more than a hundred yards long by fifty or so, broad, it made up for this shortcoming, by appearing to be exceedingly deep, and unexpectedly slimy looking.

'Oh. Now look at this.' cried Alun, 'this is exactly the place to baptise your new suit.'

'Very funny.' I hissed

Anyhow, the rest of my reply was drowned by the shouts coming from Mike and the balloon pilot.

They waved their arms and shouted and waved again.

However, this did not seem to have any noticeable effect on the downward trajectory of the basket.

'Can't you do something, you damn idiots?' the pilot screamed.

We exchanged looks and pulled faces, which of course he could not distinguish at that distance.

Then there was a splashing sound, but the basket seemed to have decided to float rather than sink

Mike shook his fist at us then made what we all considered to be a very unwarranted gesture in our direction.

'Shows bad breeding,' sighed Alun.

'All is not yet lost,' I said. 'Mike is still young.'

Anyway, at this moment, the basket seemed to decide that enough was enough, and to deem that toppling over was now the best course to follow for any basket who respected itself.

So, topple it did.

'That's nice green slime on that lake.' Nodded Alun.

'I believe it's several hundred years old?' I smiled. Apparently, the first count had it imported from the north of Canada.'

'That's interesting.' Said Alun.

'Yes,' I smiled, 'And here, if I am not mistaken my dear Watson, is our client.'

As the basket gently emptied its contents into the cold green slime, a tall, slim and elegantly dressed old man was to be observed striding from the far end of the lake.

'I believe that that is the Count. By the way, the true owner of the chateau, is his wife, the Comtesse.' I said.

‘Whoever the owner, this gentleman doesn’t seem to be all that happy about having a nice big, hot-air balloon in his lake,’ added Alun.

‘Probably upsets the "fishin",’ I suggested.

By this time there was a lot of splashing about in the water then, with a sad sighing noise the balloon deflated and drifted sedately down.

The basket and its floundering occupants disappeared under the multi-coloured shroud, as for that matter did most of the lake.

The striding figure came to a halt and shouted, ‘Hey! Hey there.’

There was no answer, so he plumped his hand on his hips and leant forward, squinting at the multi-coloured expanse of fabric.

‘Hey!’ he cried again, ‘come out of there at once. There’s no use hiding. I know you are in there.’

At this, he turned and spotted us.

‘And what are you two doing on my land?’

I held out my hands in a typical French gesture.

‘Trespassing, that’s what you’re doing.’

‘We came to help,’ called Alun.

The Count snorted and frowned, ‘foreigners too. I might have guessed. Go on, get off my land, before I set the dogs on you.’

‘Dogs?’ cried Alun, ‘Which dogs?’

The Count seemed to be a little taken aback by this remark and looked quickly around. However, noting a singular lack of hounds or dogs to be set on us, he scowled.

‘You foreign tourists make me sick.’

‘Hey!’ shouted Alun.

‘Keep quiet Alun, he probably knows my wife’s sister by her Christian name.’

'Ah! Yes, OK.'

At this precise moment, Margaux, my wife and her sister appeared though the trees. 'Oh, hello Monsieur le Comte. Having some trouble, I see. Can we help?'

The count's face cleared, and a smile broadened across it. 'Oh. Hello, my dear. Yes, the same trouble as usual.'

'Not trespassers again, I hope?'

'Well, I suppose not. But why on earth these people insist on this ridiculous and utterly illegal habit of landing in my lake, I just don't understand.'

'Obviously, foreigners.' called my wife as the three approached the old man.

They then did something I never expected to see in my lifetime the three exchanged looks, and all bobbed a curtsy to the Count.

'If I hadn't seen that with my own eyes, I just wouldn't have believed it,' whispered Alun.

'That's Margaux's tactics, no doubt,' I said.

'She should be ashamed of herself,' Alun shook his head. His diplomatic principles didn't include pandering to nobles.

'But she won't be ashamed.'

'No. That at least's certain,' sighed Alun.

Margaux had by then been presented to the Count, who was beaming on the three women. He had seemingly forgotten the huge multi-coloured balloon which continued to deflate gradually over the lake.

'Foreigners. Again?' asked my wife's sister.

'Oh, I don't know. Certainly not gentlemen in any case.' He stiffened, 'A gentleman would have requested authorisation before plumping a gaudy contraption like that in the middle of one's lake, don't you think?'

‘Absolutely,’ nodded Margaux.

‘Messes up the fishing, you know.’ Grumbled the old man.

‘Do you still fish the lake?’ asked Margaux.

‘Good heavens no, of course not. The fish in there taste disgusting. Always have.’

‘I suppose it's the principle of the thing,’ suggested my wife.

‘Exactly. And the fools nearly smashed your roof too. I saw that.’

My wife took the old man by the arm, ‘I suppose there is not much more you can do here now,’ she smiled, ‘Why don't we leave these foreign men here to help them drag the thing clear.’

The Count glanced at us and nodded, ‘Yes. You're right, my dear. Obviously manual workers of some sort. Foreign of course, but manual workers always know how to deal with this sort of thing. It's what they are bred for.’

Alun took a step forward, but I caught his arm and held him back, ‘Let the girls deal with things Alun.’

He made a grumbling noise but stopped all the same.

‘Well ladies, after all this emotion, would you do me the honour of taking a cup of tea with me. I'm sure that the Comtesse will be delighted for a little company, even so early in the morning.’

And off the four went. The Girls chatting happily with the old man, who had clearly put balloons, lakes and foreigners out of his mind.

We turned to observe that the mass of coloured material had become oddly animated.

Strange shapes could be seen thrashing about under the material, gradually coming closer to the bank.

Then suddenly, a head appeared near the lake edge. 'Bloody hell.' It cried.

'That's Mike, I think?' I said.

'Help!' cried Mike again.

We stepped forward and looked with dismay down the slimy mud-covered slope, leading down to the water's edge.

'Yuck.' Said Alun.

'Yes, a bit slimy,' I agreed, 'He doesn't seem to be much in immediate danger of drowning, does he?'

'No,' agreed Alun, 'He'll survive, unfortunately. Come on, Mike. Up here,' he called, keeping prudently on the dry grass verge.

As Mike struck out for the slope, the water seemed to come alive, as dozens of overweight toads emerged from under the mud, and to jump off in all directions.

'Hell,' cried Alun, 'I hate toads.'

As Mike reach the muddy slope, there was more commotion from behind as the balloon fabric writhed and jumped amazingly. To our amazement, the pilot had disentangled himself and was swimming at a fantastic speed across the lake away from us.

'Why the hell is he going that way?' I shouted.

Then there was a renewed splashing, and we discovered the reason.

From under the deflated balloon, something big white and furious emerged.

'Oh hell!' cried Mike, spotting it, 'Help!'

The big white thing was none else than a big and clearly very angry swan.

It freed itself from the mess and immediately spotted Mikes rear, some ten yards distant.

It flapped its wings and hissed and splashed violently. Then setting its neck in the right direction, dashed in Mikes direction at truly prodigious speed.

‘Hell!’ screamed Mike as he reached the mud slope.

He dug his hands deep into the slimy mud and somehow got a hold.

He levered himself out of the water, slammed his shoe toes into the mud and floundered up the slope as fast as he could.

However, water and mud are one and the same thing to swans, brought up in such an environment, so the race was somewhat biased.

That’s to say it was biased, until, its strong yellow beak met Mikes soft buttocks.

Mike let out a yell, which must have been audible in the orbital space station, but he did something no one would have expected.

He turned on the swan.

‘You bloody swine,’ he screamed, grabbing a branch which was floating nearby.

The swan obviously did not understand English swear words. After hissing and flapping its wing a bit more menacingly, it came on again, its neck stretched forwards like a hose pipe.

‘Mike brought the branch down with a smack on the swan’s head with such violence that the branch and head disappeared under the water.

Mike dropped the branch and scrambled, slithering up the slope and onto the dry verge.

He quickly turned to check for pursuit, but the water was now strangely calm.

'Christ Mike,' cried Alun, 'You've killed the poor little swan.'

'What!' cried Mike.

However, at the same moment, the swans head reappeared out of the water, albeit a little groggily.

However, it seemed to shake itself back to its senses and then spotted us.

'Oh, hell!' I shouted as the thing shook its wings and literally took off from the water surface in our direction.

Within seconds we were through the band of trees and sprinting across the field towards the house.

The swan was close on our heels, and it was difficult to see how we could escape when the swan discovered one of Alun's barbed wire fence.

'That serves it right,' laughed Alun as he ran.

The swan's webbed foot caught in it, and by the time it had disentangled itself, we were behind the double-glazed windows.

We sighed with relief, but at that very moment, the swan caught sight of one of the other balloons which were now drifting in our direction.

It hissed and squawked and flapping its impressive wings in anger, took off in its direction.

"Oh, god!" cried Mike.

'Oh well.' I sighed, 'every sport seems to have its dangers.'

'Oh god,' Cried Mike, 'my bum.'

'Don't worry, Mike,' laughed Alun, 'We'll all have a look at you buttocks in a moment. Let's see what that swan can do with this balloon first.'

Well, the whole thing was a bit of a let-down.

The pilot of the balloon, spotting the incoming projectile, fired his burner, and the swan veered off and disappeared behind the trees.

'Call that a swan?' gasped Alun. 'What do they bring them up on over here.'

'A decent British swan would have gone straight through that balloon,' I sighed, and, it would have followed them down and chased them all the way back to Grenoble.'

'Too much wine before breakfast, perhaps,' suggested Alun.

'Ah, well!' I said, 'That was good fun, though.'

'Yeh,' smiled Alun, 'almost like the good old times.'

'No, it damn well wasn't,' cried Mike, 'I almost got killed falling off that damn balloon, then nearly got suffocated under it AND drowned in that filthy lake.'

'You should have been more careful, Mike,' said Alun, shaking his head sadly, 'you'll get yourself hurt one of these days.'

I looked over at his be-slimed clothes and mustered up a sympathetic tone. 'That lake wasn't any too clean, was it?'

'I wondered what that smell was,' nodded Alun.

'It was strange though,' I frowned, 'how that swan seemed to have been able to keep itself so snowy white when it's swimming about in that mess all day.'

Alun nodded, 'Yes, odd that. And it only took Mike a few seconds to get into an incredibly filthy state.'

'Shut up,' grumbled Mike.

'And did you notice the size of that big yellow beak?'

'No,' said Mike, 'I felt it.'

'Must be a hell of a lot of vitamins in that slime.' I volunteered.

'And minerals,' I added.

'Oligo-elements, too,' smiled Alun, 'masses of them, I'll bet.'

'Can't you shut up, you two?' sighed Mike.

'It a peculiar smell.' I said, 'like a mixture of rotting wood, mushrooms and decomposing seaweed.'

'That's because that is what it was,' said Alun, 'with a little water added.'

Mike lifted his soaking shirt sleeve to his nose and pulled a face, 'yuck!'

Alun stepped over and leant down, 'Yes, pretty yucky. I wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea to have a shower before the girls get back.'

Mike thought about this, and especially about the unkind menace Margaux had threatened him with.

'Yes, good idea. I'll do that straight away shall I?'

We nodded, 'We'll search out some beer while you're about it.,' I said.

'I think I'd prefer a glass of iced white wine if you can find any,' he replied plaintively.

'A big glass?'

'A mug would be better.' he called back as he squelched towards the stairs.