

I had collected Jules Verne's famous *Voyages Extraordinaires* for years in the magnificent *Edition polychrome* and had an almost complete set of over 50 books. Later I had to sell them to the Bryn Mawr College near Philadelphia in order to live. I had even become a member of the French Jules Verne Society and attended their meetings in France: lectures, dinners and visits, I had in fact become a real Jules Verne fan. I was not ignorant of his first book *Cinq semaines en ballon* published in 1863 in Paris, but I never imagined that in 1963 anyone would try and repeat this imaginary voyage across Africa, one hundred years later.

But this was precisely the intention of Anthony Smith, the Science Correspondent of the London *Daily Telegraph*. He had a very good reason to do so, as in Jules Verne's book, the intrepid balloonist was none other than Dr Samuel Ferguson, the Geographical Correspondent of the then greatest London daily newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, selling for one penny a copy. Anthony had little difficulty in persuading the owner of the newspaper, Mr Michael Berry, later Lord Hartwell, to subsidise his balloon flight across Africa as a publicity venture for his, in 1963 still the greatest paper in Fleet Street.

But even with all modern facilities at his disposal, it was not easy for Anthony to repeat the Jules Verne voyage — balloons had not become any more dirigible in the 100 year interval and were still at the mercy of the prevailing winds. In the book, Dr Samuel Ferguson had an ingenious small furnace in his gondola, heated by hydrogen and oxygen. The hydrogen of the balloon was to be passed through the furnace to increase its volume and thus the height of the balloon, in order to find favourable winds. This suicidal idea was of course quite inapplicable for Anthony's repeat project, and he had to establish a number of depots of large hydrogen cylinders across Africa, if he had to have any chance to travel across the continent.

He had to have a balloon manufactured in Belgium and pass a 'driving test' for ballooning before he could start from Zanzibar on the east coast of Africa and trust to local winds to carry him westwards as Dr Ferguson had done. However, he did need 'for a few weeks' someone else to write about science in the *Daily Telegraph* and his choice fell on me. As I was just then free of any other commitments, I accepted his suggestion and started as a temporary employee on 13 August 1963. Everyone thought Anthony's project quite impracticable, dangerous in the extreme, and foretold his demise in Africa. Some friends strongly advised me to accept the appointment, as I would not only inherit his job permanently, but would also marry his highly attractive wife, Barbara Smith. Only one of these forecasts came true.