

# A Rocky Start

by Tim Lee

‘Isn’t it magnificent?’ Henri said, his formidable bulk hanging precariously over the edge of the basket.

‘A splendid vista, indeed!’ Gaston agreed, nodding vigorously. ‘I did always adore that word: “Vista” – a lovely sound to it.’

Wisps of cloud swirled past as they glided through the sky. Unusually for Gaston, he wasn’t fidgeting or leaping about. Henri adjusted his goggles and wiped the moisture from the lenses. He stared off towards the horizon, transfixed.

‘And to think of all those land-dwellers down there who can only see what’s right in front of them. A tree, a cow, maybe a hill. But us, the French Zoological Society... now Aeronauts! Way up in the clouds in our marvellous balloon – we see the big picture. How it all fits together.’

‘We do?’ ventured Gaston.

‘How the forest paints the land in giant, green brush strokes until it meets the shimmering blue of the sea. How the mountain range dominates the skyline and...’

‘I say, how quickly we’ve evolved in your eyes! We’ve been up here not twenty minutes and already you pity the naivety we had only this morning.’

Henri shook his large head wistfully. ‘What little we knew. Gaston, we were like newborns wearing blindfolds.’

Gaston chuckled and clapped Henri on the back with a small but strong hand. ‘If you say so, my dear friend, then I suppose we were.’ The clouds thickened for a time, blown by the same brisk wind that pushed along the bright red balloon. Then the mists thinned and disappeared. Gaston jumped, his coarse, black hair standing on end.

‘Oh, er... that mountain is dominating a little more than it was before, don’t you think? Either it’s grown or we’re getting frightfully close.’

‘What’s going on, then?’ asked Shenzi, loping up to the front of the basket. ‘Looks like we’re going to crash!’

Henri squinted at the approaching spire of rock for a moment, then nodded. ‘Yes, I suppose it is looming rather large.’

The balloon was suddenly thrown into shadow as the bright morning sun was obscured by a billion tonnes of rock.

‘Perhaps we ought to try going up a bit... or maybe a lot,’ suggested Gaston.

‘Yes, perhaps so. Now, which of these pulley things is for lift?’ Henri said, eyeing the various controls. ‘Why don’t you try that one there?’

Gaston jumped and pulled down on the cord. The three adventurers followed the line, up, up, up to the top of the balloon where the parachute valve was opening.

‘We’re venting!’ exclaimed Shenzi as Gaston released the cord.

‘Yes, that’s not what we want at all. Well, it must be that one, then,’ said Henri, indicating a small dial.

Gaston quickly sprang up and twisted it. The flame from the burner shot up as propane flooded in – he felt the blast of heat through the chill air.

‘That’s the one.’ Henri nodded firmly as he spoke.

Gaston was puffing, holding onto the side of the basket with both arms. ‘I thought... huff... you said... huff... you’d flown one of these before!’ he got out between breaths.

‘Yes, in my dreams! Every night I sail through the sky. Funny thing is, I never had a problem with the controls until now.’

But still the light continued to dim as the balloon sank towards the mountain. Gaston began to whimper, not yet having recovered from the last panic.

‘We’re too heavy! Need to lose some weight, as Mr Shenzi is always telling me!’  
Shenzi rolled onto her back and laughed.

‘Yes, of course! We’ve got too much weight!’ Gaston said. He scanned the items on the floor and then picked up a large case. ‘Over the side it goes!’ He hefted it onto the rim of the basket.

‘Stop monkeying around – not the Bollinger! What’ll we drink?’ complained Henri.

Gaston shoved the box and watched it plummet. The balloon’s descent slowed. He scrambled to find the next piece of ballast.

‘Oh, this looks like fun!’ said Shenzi, brought out of her hysterics by the commotion. Between the two of them, they jettisoned a fully-equipped picnic hamper, a chest full of jams, a further three cases of champagne and a crate so heavy it took both of them to lift it.

‘My Swiss cheeses!’ exclaimed Henri, stamping in despair. They heard it smash into the rocks, not far enough below them. They were no longer dropping but they weren’t rising either. And still the mountain grew closer.

‘We need to do something. We’re going to crash!’ shouted Shenzi, her natural humour finally giving way to fright.

‘We’ll all be killed,’ sobbed Gaston, covering his eyes as he wept. ‘And it’s all your fault!’ He pointed a shaking finger at Henri.

‘A sporting way to go though, don’t you think?’ said Henri. ‘A true adventurer’s end!’ Shenzi and Gaston stared at Henri and then looked at each other and then, slowly, looked back towards Henri. As one, they pounced.

‘Hey now, what is this?’ asked Henri.

‘If it’s an adventurer’s end you want, then it’s an adventurer’s end you’ll get,’ said Gaston, struggling to get Henri’s front left leg over the rim of the wicker basket.

‘You get to save the day,’ said Shenzi, wheezing and holding up Henri’s head.

‘We’ll tell everyone you volunteered!’ said Gaston, running around to push on Henri’s large behind. ‘You’ll die a hero, old friend!’

‘A hero!’ said Henri, pride in his voice and eyes shining.

With one final shove, using his tail for support, Gaston sent Henri over the edge. The balloon suddenly rocketed up, like a bubble shooting to the top of a champagne flute. The bottom of the basket snagged, for one heart-wrenching moment, on the tip of the mountain, and then it broke free. They had made it.

‘Well, that’s the last time I bring a hippopotamus on a hot-air balloon ride!’ said Shenzi. The hyena and the monkey laughed with relief until tears streamed down their faces.

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