

## SADEX SWANS

When Margie and I drove down to Pietrasanta to deliver the next batch of plasters and collect the bronzes that had been cast, we always planned our trips to take place over the first week of June or October. The Italians call these two periods the 'Golden Weeks'. The sun is meant to shine at this time of year and the tourists have either not yet arrived or have gone home!

We would cross the Channel on the hovercraft in the morning and drive east to Reims to avoid Paris, drop down and cross over the Jura Mountains via the Saint-Cerque Pass, arriving at Nyon on Lake Geneva in the late afternoon. It was here that we had found one of the most charming little hotels in the world, the Clos de Sadex.



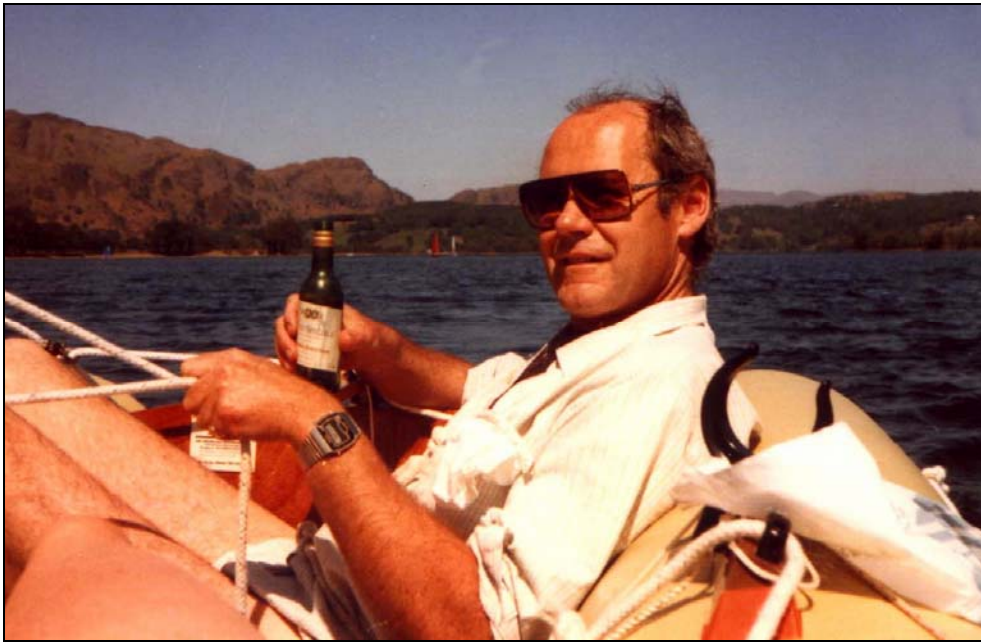
*Hôtel Clos de Sadex*

The house had been built as a summer home for a Geneva banker but between the two German Wars the family had turned it into a small hotel. Unfortunately they have now sold and it has reverted to a private home again, so it is no longer an attractive haven for passing motorists to overnight at.

We found the hotel quite by chance and used it for several years. We became friends with the owners and it was wonderful to be greeted by them, shown to our favourite room and rest for a couple of days. The room had been the main bedroom at the front of the house looking out over the little private harbour across the lake. It had a balcony where we could have our breakfast in the morning and sip our drink in the evening as we gazed out at the sailing boats. It really was a halcyon spot.

The days of taking the boys sailing had passed, but I still loved the idea of wind, sail and water. We could fit the inflatable *Rubber Duck* in the station wagon so, on the last year that the hotel was to remain in the family's hands, Margie and I decided to stay with them for five days and sail on Lac Léman. We arrived in beautiful sunshine on June 1st, to be told that up to that day it

had been raining solidly for a month! *How lucky can you be, butter side up!* After a leisurely breakfast on our balcony we blew up the *Rubber Duck*, rigged the mast and slid it into the lake.



### ***'Rubber Duck' on Lac Léman***

We stowed the outboard in the bows and rowed out with our picnic. There was not a cloud in the sky and unfortunately, not a breath of wind. I soon got tired of rowing so on went the tiny outboard and we were quickly in the middle of the lake with views on all sides that were quite out of this world. We drifted on the glassy waters surrounded by peace and quiet, thick enough to cut with a knife. The sun shone and it was time to have our simple sandwiches lunch so I opened the wine. I had suspended the bottle on the end of a bit of string, so it was nice and cold.

The day got hotter and hotter so we decided to take a swim. As we might have been on the moon as far as people were concerned, we stripped off and jumped in the water. God was it cold! No wonder the wine had been so well chilled. We should have taken note! We had been dangling our wrists in the water to keep cool and had remarked on how warm it was, but we had not realised this only applied to the top six inches! What a scramble to get back into the *Rubber Duck*! Fortunately the sides of an inflatable are very easy to hoist oneself over. We soon warmed up in the sun, but decided to head for home for a hot bath and a much-needed Kir-Royale on our balcony.

The following day we had a gentle breeze so we decided to sail across the lake and back. We were away by ten o'clock and as the wind was from the west and blowing straight up the lake from Geneva, we made really good progress. We were both on the windward side of the *Duck* with our backs to Geneva so failed to notice a fleet of yachts bearing down on us. They had their spinnakers up and we were sailing across their bows. Within moments we were surrounded by at least 20 enormous yachts, crewed by elegant young men in white flannel trousers. We found out later that it was the Geneva-Lausanne Regatta, the climax of the Lac Léman yachting season!

I have never been able to work out exactly who has the *right of way* when sailing, but as the crews were all laughing at our discomfort and not shaking their fists, I guess it was our *right of way*! We bobbed peacefully through the flotilla and were soon left in their wake. Maybe they left us alone because we were flying the Australian Navy's White Ensign, given to us by the Governor of New South Wales! Whatever the reason, it was a wonderful moment and definitely one to remember.

Another event to recall on that trip involved a pair of beautiful white swans that owned the hotel's harbour, seeing off any intruders that dared to show their beaks in their sanctuary. We always kept back bread from our meals and took it out to the harbour wall for them and on seeing us they would paddle over to take crumbs from our fingers. They were a very elegant couple.



*Mr and Mrs Sadex Swan*

During May the lake suddenly rises six inches because of the mountain snowmelt. This particular year the melt was late so the swans had built their nest on a little beach in the corner of the tiny harbour before the snowmelt. Madame was already sitting on two eggs and looking pleased with herself. One morning we noticed from our balcony that she seemed to be very agitated. I went down to see if a cat was disturbing her and realised that the water had risen several inches over night. The swan was desperately pulling her nest in around the eggs in an attempt to keep them above the steadily rising water. I could also see that there was just not enough material to achieve this. We had a crisis on our hands!

Just over the harbour wall in a vacant property there was a thick bed of reeds. I harvested an armful and brought them back to the nest. Would Madame accept material from my hand as she did the bread? I laid the reeds gently around the nest within reach of her long neck and stepped back to watch. She just reached out and started to build and within a minute or so she had used up all the reeds and the eggs looked a lot more secure. She then looked up and said, "Well, don't just stand there!"



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*The summer water level can be seen on the right-hand rock*



*Raising the nest*

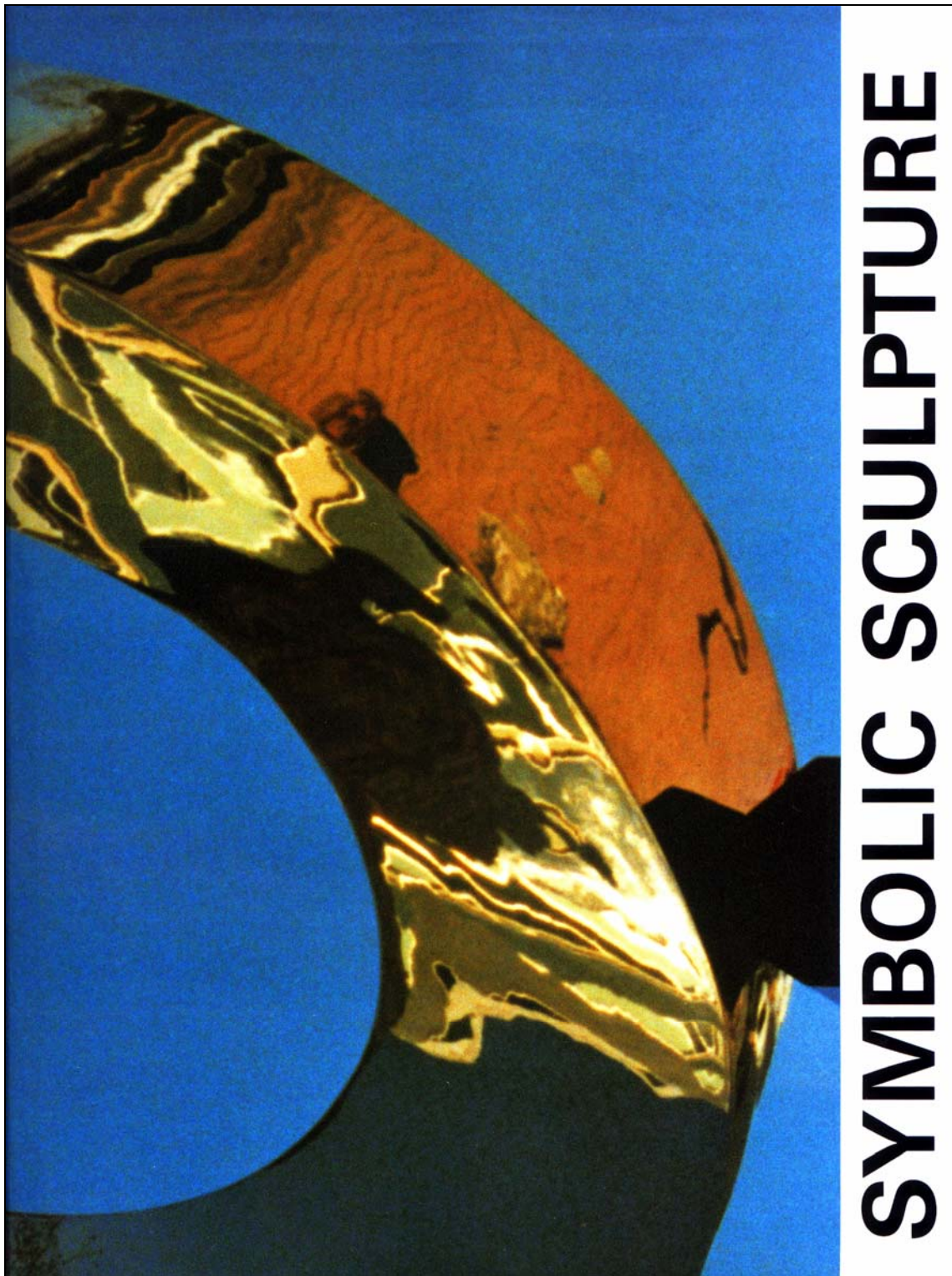
I worked for an hour cutting reeds and bringing them over to the harbour, while she worked at stacking them to raise the nest. We both took a break at lunchtime, but after our siesta I came back to see how things were going and found that they were not too good, as the water was still rising. I went back to cutting reeds until we had the nest well above the water level. She got some extra bread that evening as well!

Margie and I were due to leave at dawn the following day for the foundry, so I just hoped the waters would stop rising and not flood the nest and drown the eggs. With heavy hearts we said goodbye to the swans, explaining to them both that there was nothing more we could do.

After spending a week at the foundry we returned and the first thing we did on arriving was to go and check the nest. Imagine our delight when we were greeted with the sight of two tiny little goslings paddling around with their mother in the harbour. The nest was high and dry and the reeds had saved the day! It really was the most wonderful thing to have witnessed.



*The proud mother with her goslings*



*Edition Limitée 1992, book cover*