



MR. HENRY COXWELL AT TOTTENHAM.

“WHAT, is old Coxwell still alive!” people will exclaim when they begin to read your interview with me,” said the grand old aeronaut to me as we pulled our chairs up to the fire after a substantial lunch, and set about filling our pipes.

“Very much alive, I should say, by the way you tackled that piece of beef just now,” I replied.

“Yet my butcher tells me my teeth are not so good as they used to be, when I complain that his meat is tough. They’re a better set, I tell him, than I had when I seized the valve-rope in my teeth when we were over seven miles high, and Glaisher was lying insensible in the car of the ‘Mammoth,’” and the old man chuckled on recalling his apt retort.

“By-the-bye, you were brought up as a dentist, were you not?”

“Certainly; and I followed my profession for a number of years; in fact, after I took up ballooning as a regular business. I had made quite fifty ascents with one aeronaut and another—indeed, having from my boyhood always made a point of taking some part in every balloon ascent around London, even if it were only as a spectator—when my friends began to say, ‘If you are so keen on ballooning to the neglect of dentistry, and incur the risk of the dangers of ascending as a passenger with no profit to your pocket,

why don’t you get a balloon of your own and be your own captain?”

“Now do you think it is a good plan to let a boy follow his bent in the choice of a profession?” I interpolated.

“Yes, when it is evidently a passion like that which possessed me from the first time I caught sight from our playground at Camberwell of Green’s balloon ascending from the Surrey Zoological Gardens.”

“And when did you yourself first ascend in a balloon, Mr. Coxwell?”

“Nearly fifty-one years ago. Yes; it was in August 1844 when I ascended with Mr. Hampton from the White Conduit Gardens, Pentonville, and under the assumed name of ‘Mr. Wells,’ for fear that my patients might resent being attended by a ‘balloonatic.’ We only travelled twenty-five miles; but I shall never forget my first experience—even now, after having made more than a thousand ascents—of the enchantment of beholding the country spreading itself out like a carpet, and changing each second in form, hue, and dimensions in a manner quite indescribable.”

“Of course, you must have had many narrow squeaks?”

“A few,” he replied, with a significant smile; “and very nearly the worst was when I ascended as a passenger along with Albert Smith and others in Gypson’s

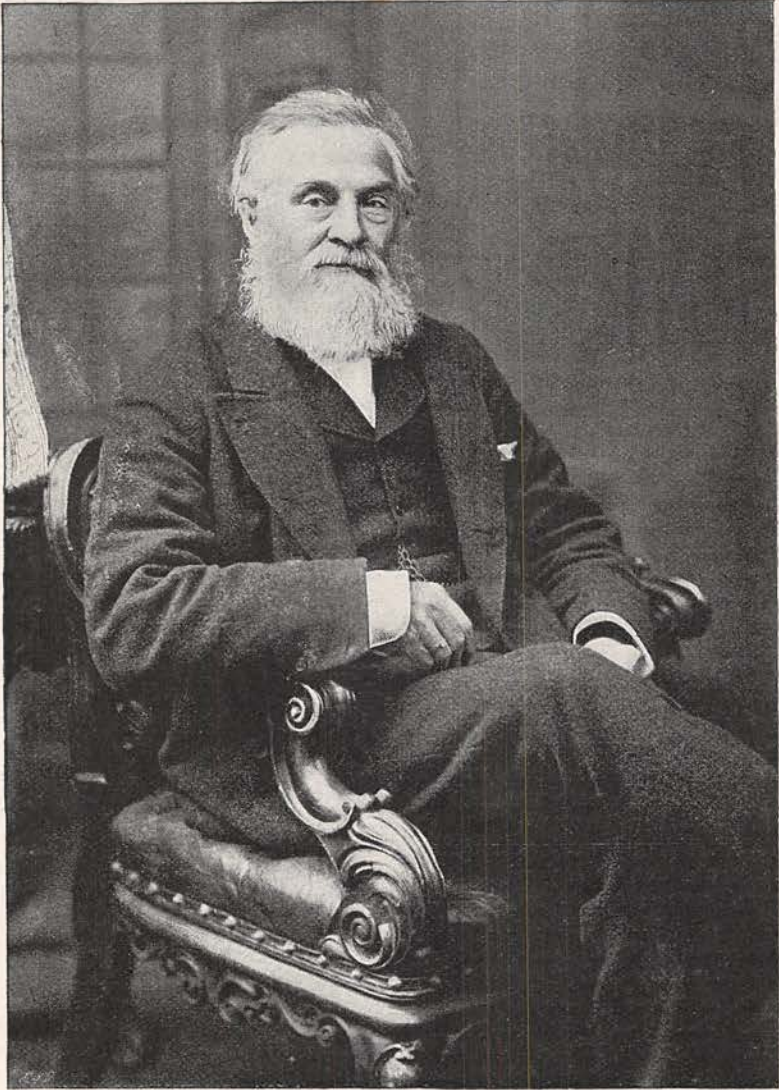


Photo by T. Wright, Barking Road, E.

MR. HENRY COXWELL.

balloon from Vauxhall. It was in 1847. The sky had been threatening for some time before the hour fixed for the ascent; but it was thought we might go up and discharge the sixty pounds' weight of fireworks in mid-air, and descend before the storm broke. So up we went. It was night-time, of course. I sat in the hoop. We got through the firework display—and very fine it was—all right at an altitude of about four thousand feet; but the loss of the weight of the pyrotechnics sent us up far higher, occasioning a rush of gas from the safety-valve, which at once suggested to me the necessity of relieving the pressure by opening the upper valve, but other counsels prevailed. Suddenly what I expected happened. The balloon burst. Naturally we began to fall like a stone, and undoubtedly we should all have been killed had I not, in spite of remonstrance, cut the cord which connects the neck part of the balloon with the hoop. At once the loose silk flew upwards and became distended, converting the balloon into a kind of parachute, which acted so efficaciously that we descended in the Belgrave Road, with a terrible crash, it is true, but with whole bones. I believe it was this adventure, demonstrating the necessity of trusting to one's own resources in the face of danger, which induced me to follow my friends' advice, and start as an 'air-captain,' as the Germans express it, in a balloon acquired from Lieutenant Gale which I christened the 'Sylph.'

"And what did you do with her?"

"After a few initial trips in England I took her to Brussels, to other towns in Belgium and Prussia, Hanover, Moravia, and Austria. I won't bore you with any reminiscences beyond the difficulties of obtaining gas, the fret caused by official 'red-tapeism' generally, and the sensational effect I seemed to create by descending a Jacob's rope-ladder from my car in order to light the fuse which would presently ignite the shells and fireworks suspended below, while the fact that the balloon was riddled on one occasion by bullets, on the suspicion that we were Danish spies, may interest you. Yet still another incident I remember, and that was the only ascent Mrs. Coxwell ever made. It was in Berlin in revolutionary times, when she generously sacrificed her inclinations in order to appease public feeling, which had been irritated by the official prohibition to allow me to demonstrate how a city could be bombarded from a balloon."

"And now you return to Merrie England, I'm sure?"

"You are quite right. In the autumn of 1851 we bade adieu to Germany, where we had spent on the whole a very good time. And what did I find? Well, Charles Green was getting feeble, and Gale was dead, killed in his ascent from Bordeaux. His patron, Goulston, shortly after shared the same fate. Although it was the year after the first great Exhibition I determined to make more ascents this year than had been made during the last three or four seasons. I carried out my resolve, and pursued the same course during the subsequent year, and, indeed, every year till my last public ascent, June 17, 1885, the eve of Waterloo day. This last occasion made the twenty-sixth annual gala meeting which I had attended with my balloon at York, where I have had the honour of taking up a Lord Mayor. Curiously enough on this, my last ascent, the currents of air were such that the 'City of York' made a complete circuit of the city after which she was named, and seemed to symbolise the completion of the cycle of my own aeronautic career," said he, evidently regretfully.

"A balloon ascent has a great attraction for the people, I have always noticed," I remarked presently.

"And so much so that they won't be disappointed. I remember once in particular that I was unexpectedly advertised to ascend from the Globe Gardens in the Mile End Road. The only balloon I had at home was not completely revarnished, so that it leaked, and so much so that it would have been impossible for me to have gone up. My only course was to fix up an effigy of myself in the car; and, as the balloon was let go, I slipped away out of sight enveloped in a cloak and a pair of false whiskers. An angry and incensed crowd is not too nice, I can tell you. I recollect at the Foresters' Fête at Leicester, in 1864, a story got about that I was palming off a smaller balloon than was my new balloon 'Britannia.' There were quite fifty thousand people present. Feeling was so high that they broke down every barrier, resisting the small body of police completely. I only just escaped with my life. As to my balloon, it was torn, and then burst. I may add, however, that a subscription was made, which pretty nearly compensated me."

"Of course, the most memorable event in your life was——"

"The occasion of my ascent with Mr. Glaisher to the highest altitude ever

yet attained. I was up even higher than he was, for I was in the hoop. But that's an old story, I am sick of talking about it."

"Never mind, as the children say, 'tell us it again.'"

"Well, then, a great meeting was held at Wolverhampton of the Committee of the British Association in 1862, where it was decided to make meteorological observations at as great an elevation as was possible. They wanted my balloon 'Mars,' but I demonstrated that its cubic capacity made it impossible to attain the end desired. After a good deal of argument, I offered to build a brand new balloon when I heard that Mr. Glaisher would accompany me. This balloon, 'The Mammoth,' was made at Tottenham in 1862. It had a holding capacity of 93,000 cubic feet of gas. Mr. Glaisher and I made together many noteworthy ascents, some from the Crystal Palace, but the most remarkable was the record one from Wolverhampton on Sept. 5, 1862. We started at three minutes past one p.m. In thirty-seven minutes we were four miles high; the temperature was 8 deg. Ten minutes afterwards we were a mile higher, when the thermometer marked 34 deg. of frost. Shortly afterwards I found my breathing impeded. Mr. Glaisher could not see distinctly, and before long, when we were up 29,000 feet, he complained that his arms were powerless. Presently he seemed to collapse. I was in the hoop, and as I regarded him I thought at the moment that he had lain back to rest, but shortly I perceived that he was unconscious. I said 'Do try, now do!' I endeavoured to approach him, but could not, for insensibility was stealing over me. I made an effort to pull the valve, but my hands were frost-bitten. Seizing the cord, however, with my teeth, and dipping my head two or three times, I liberated sufficient gas to make the balloon take a downward course. The instruments showed that we had ascended 37,000 feet, or over seven miles—*i.e.*, much higher than the loftiest mountain in the world. We descended all right near Ludlow."

The more often I hear this adventure recounted the more remarkable it strikes me. But to proceed.

"It was always a pleasure to go with Mr. Glaisher, as he had absolutely no fear from his very first ascent. So safe did he feel himself that on some occasions he took his little son. We had a risky time of it next year. We started from the Crystal Palace. In thirteen minutes we were 10,000 feet

high, and an hour afterwards we had ascended 24,000 feet. Then we descended. When we got out of the clouds we found ourselves in sight of Beachy Head and close to the sea. Not a moment was to be lost. We both set to work with the idea of turning the balloon into the parachute form. We shot down like an arrow, but we just escaped the sea."

"What is the worst 'bump' you ever got, Mr. Coxwell?"

"The one that put me on crutches. It was in this way. I took two young gentlemen, the Messrs. Pearson, of Lawton Hall, from Congleton in my balloon 'Mars'—which, by the way, had escaped destruction by a fall of buildings at the Crystal Palace and the fire at the Camden Town goods station. We attempted to descend near Buxton. Misled by one of my passengers, who professed a local knowledge, I found myself amongst a region of loose stone walls. These could not hold my grapple. The result was that after charging three or four walls, the balloon was ripped up and the car was hurled to the ground filled with stones, which had fractured the skull of Mr. T. Pearson, broken Mr. A. Pearson's forearm, and had cut and bruised me from head to foot, and contused my right thigh badly. I was laid up for a long time. Indeed, my friends regarded me as a permanent invalid. I know my wife used quite cheerfully to remark, 'Well, Henry, you can't go up in those horrid balloons any more, that's certain.' But I did, for I made that high scientific ascent with Mr. Glaisher a year afterwards."

"Have you ever crossed over the Channel, Mr. Coxwell?" I asked as I refilled my pipe.

"No; but I was prepared to do so, had the wind permitted. Mr. Murray, an artist on the *Illustrated London News*, with whom I had made more than one balloon voyage, informed me of Mr. (now Sir) William Ingram's great wish to make the transit from a point somewhere on the Sussex coast as a more daring feat than had been previously made. Accordingly I had everything ready at Lewes, while Sir William kept himself prepared to arrive whenever I should wire him. But the event never came off. I regretted that it was so more on Sir William's account, as I knew from his great interest in ballooning that he would be greatly disappointed. First, the wind was contrary, though Mr. Murray in an excess of zeal insisted on mistaking the points of the compass, and created

'ructions' in consequence; and secondly, news arrived that Colonel Burnaby had forestalled us by crossing from Dover, giving us therefore no *kudos* to gain.*

"What do you say as to the possibility of reaching the North Pole by balloons?"

"I was on one occasion approached on this subject," Mr. Coxwell replied as he set his smoking-cap more firmly on his head. "Commander Cheyne asked me if I could supply three balloons serviceable for employment during an Arctic summer. I replied that I could do so, but I declined the responsibility, and for other reasons I took my name off the committee."

"I believe you thoroughly believe in balloons as adjuncts to military operations?"

"Most certainly. For the last thirty years I have advocated their use. At the Crystal Palace, many years since, I gave an exhibition of their signalling capabilities by day and night. Their employment in reconnoitring is most important to my mind; and in the history of British arms they might have averted more than one disaster, while I am convinced that they become a most potent arm in dropping projectiles and explosives on besieged cities.

"In 1863 I sufficiently stirred the military authorities as to permit me to give experiments at Aldershot and at Woolwich Arsenal with captive balloons. After a time a balloon corps was formed, but it was permitted to buy its experience by many failures, which might have been averted if professional instruction had been engaged. Goaded to action by the

*About this period Mr. Alderman Deck, of Cambridge, was also disappointed as to a Channel trip.

Press, the Government did at length send balloons to the Soudan, but, alas! too late."

"I suppose you are so wedded to balloons that you look rather askance on flying-machines?"

"Do you refer to Mr. Lilienthal's attempts? If so I should say that his are decidedly experiments which show an advance in aerial navigation. Indeed, if sufficient motive power could give sufficient animation to his wings and tail, he might soar instead of gliding downwards from off a hilltop. At present his is nothing more than a modified parachute."

"But suppose a machine were started and given a lift up, say on a railway line, and was furnished with great aeroplanes and screws, what then?"

"I should still maintain that when the impetus was exhausted the machine would fall for want of motive power. I gave my views in the *Contemporary Magazine* some time ago. The interesting contrivance of Mr. Thomas Moy, quite twenty years back, which met Mr. Fred Brearey's approval, introduced the employment of the tramway and aeroplanes, so that the latest idea is not new. To solve the riddle of aerial flight, I believe we must discover some mechanical means, not cumbrous or rigid, some means by which the air must be struck by propellers working with more or less rapidity, similarly to the wings of a bird. At the same time, I do not despair of the air being ultimately navigated, and I should be one of the first to rejoice when the problem is solved, even if it should relegate balloons to the limbo of the Past."—T. HANSON LEWIS.