

Over Historic Ground

By the Rev. John M. Bacon, M.A., Author of "By Land and Sky"

THE many recent references that have been made to Stonehenge since the fall of one of its few remaining trilithons at the beginning of last year, scarcely more than a century since the last similar collapse, induce me to write a short account of a certain visit which I lately paid to "The Stones" (as the grand old temple is locally termed) under exceptional circumstances.

Dr. Stukeley, the "Arch-druid of the age," (1740) declares that "when you cast your eyes on the yawning ruins of Stonehenge you are struck with ecstatic reverie which none can describe, and they only can be sensible of who feel it." Most emphatically, however, I experienced nothing of this kind on the occasion I am about to describe. But I must begin at the beginning.

In the summer of 1900, Salisbury Plain, our English veldt, was in the military occupation of a large force of British troops. Five important camps were established, occupying central positions, and here the plain was rendered gay with patches of white canvas and the daily manœuvres of the soldiers. This circumstance led to my making a novel experiment, and attempting to carry out a new method of military signalling, or rather a fresh adoption of an old one.

Being instructed in the mysteries of the "Morse Code," and being moreover in touch, through the daily press, with the camps already spoken of, it occurred to me to try and establish some aerial signalling from a great height which should be plainly visible over a long stretch of country.

The idea had grown into definite shape in this way. During the war in South Africa, Kimberley, Ladysmith, Mafeking had become isolated, and it had been of the utmost importance as well as difficulty to convey messages to these beleaguered towns. Wireless telegraphy had been tried and failed, the existing telegraphic wires had been cut, and, though the heliograph had been turned

to account, it naturally was by no means invariably available.

There had been, however, the balloon in the hands of our forces. There was also to be found in the service a signalling apparatus, known by the name of a "Collapsing Drum," not often used certainly and but little known, as will be made sufficiently evident from the following incident.

Meeting with much ready co-operation in my proposed scheme, I ventured one morning to present myself at the War Office and boldly ask for the use of the instrument I wanted. Here I met with the utmost courtesy, though there was evidently some difficulty in introducing me to the department qualified to receive my application, and when at length I was referred to the right official I was kept waiting a few minutes while my request was laid before him. Eventually, when I was ushered into the presence of the proper authority, he greeted me thus: "My dear sir, I have been hunting in our list of stores, and if it is a drum of anything we have got, or a band-master's drum that you want, you shall have it, but what in the world do you mean by a collapsing drum?" Then I knew that I had made a mistake, and that I ought to have applied to the Admiralty. The collapsing drum, as will be seen, is essentially a naval signalling apparatus, consisting of a large, light, skeleton drum-shaped frame, covered with dark fabric, and slung high in clear space in such a way that it can be readily collapsed into a very inconspicuous object and again opened out to its full size.

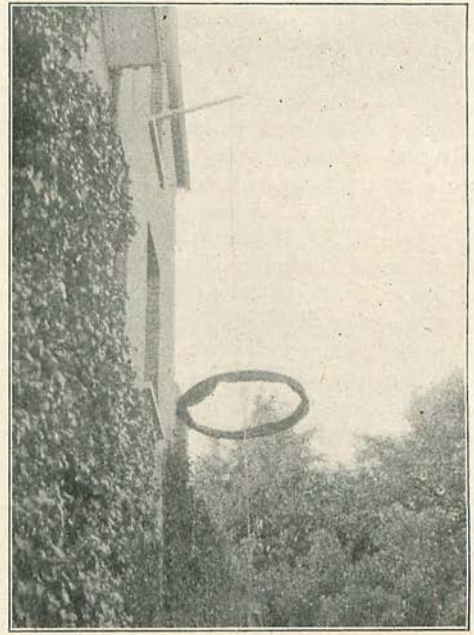
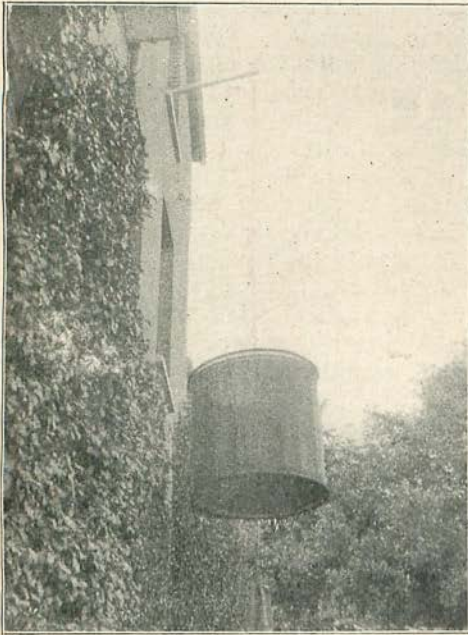
Now there is only one step from the nautical to the aeronautical, and such an instrument suspended in the clear below the car of a high-flying balloon could be easily seen over many miles against either blue sky or grey, and, moreover, while thus suspended could be most easily worked by an operator in the car above. Then by simply making a long pause with the drum extended one would signify a dash, and by a short pause a dot, and, this being understood, Morse

Code messages could be rapidly and clearly given.

All needful preparations were shortly made, and perhaps it boots not to speak at length of one false start—a complete failure as it proved, but hardly a regrettable one. Failures teach one so much, and this one among other things taught us not to go aloft in the face of a thunder cloud. That we did go, however, and also got into the very heart of

which were mainly for the purpose of showing the direction and speed of currents below us, and for indicating afterwards exactly where we went and where we might have gone according to how we had preserved different levels.

Thus it will be divined that steering our balloon came into our calculations, and there were practically two methods open to us that afternoon: one already often tried, which



The signalling apparatus known as the collapsing drum. The first photo shows it open and the second shut

the thunder cloud, has since become history, and many may recall the fact that two soldiers were actually killed on Salisbury Plain itself, which neighbourhood on that occasion we ourselves never reached.

But a better day came, and one summer afternoon, when the softest breezes were blowing, we went aloft with an equipment which proved wholly efficient though of the simplest. First there was the drum already mentioned suspended from a spar, next some explosive fog signals with which to summon any towns or villages over which we might pass, and last, but not least, a gross of addressed post-cards attached to parachutes,

depends for its success on allowing the heavy trail-rope to drag along in contact with the earth, but which for ourselves would be wholly inadmissible; the other the method actually adopted, the principle and the success of which will presently be made apparent.

Fortune gave us a happy and auspicious start, for the first notable spot we passed over after leaving the environs of Newbury was the Beacon Hill of Hampshire. Now it need hardly be said that this is the historic site of such signalling as went on in days of long ago, when telegraphy was wireless certainly, but confined to the use of beacon

fires. To the observer from the clouds the earth always wears the appearance of a dead level, heights and hollows disappear as such, and thus Beacon Hill itself looked but a spot in the plain; and yet it rises near 1000 feet above the sea and is prominently seen from Perborough Castle, fourteen miles away to the north, from Inkpen Beacon and the high ground above Silchester west and east respectively, as also from the Beacon Hill of Wilts towards the coast, where the watchman in times of alarm was always able and ready in clear weather to receive and pass the warning signal on. No less than twenty different important ancient "camps" and stations are visible from this famous Hampshire hill, and on the Jubilee night of 1887 some fifty fires could be counted from its summit, lighting the night sky. I should here mention what will be made clear from reference in a map, that ere an hour had passed we found ourselves poised in space over that equally famous Beacon Hill of Wilts just mentioned.

At this period of our journey, as we were going considerably too south for our purpose, we climbed further into the sky, and by this manoeuvre at once changed our course several points more towards the west, gaining also in speed; and shortly we were over the "Seven Barrows," a spot regarded with a species of superstitious reverence by the people of the soil. They tell you (and it is historically true) that these huge mounds were opened in the time of their grandfathers, and disclosed vast quantities of human remains, some in heaps and some lying in chambers hollowed in the solid chalk below. Moreover, not far away the high road rumbles hollow, giving back a booming sound as wheels pass over it, and it is the supposed though unexplored secret (very possibly, however, only a "fault" in the chalk bed) which invests the locality with its chief mystery.

But already we are heading for Dole's Wood and that of Collingbourn beyond, while Harewood Forest looms large on our left, woodland all of sufficient extent to enable one very fairly to conceive the state of the times long since when unbroken forests—the "horrid forests" of Cæsar—



Affixing the collapsing drum to the balloon

spread north and south, and sheltered the boar, and the wolf, and other wild life galore. But again the scene soon changes, for, mounting another thousand feet, our speed increases rapidly, and ahead woods are disappearing altogether, while a vast extent of greensward—the great plain itself—is opening out, and hard by a silver thread that twines north and south (the River Bourne surely) we can see, one on the hither side the other just beyond, two broad patches mottled white and throwing back the sunlight. There is no doubt but that these are two at least of the military camps, and already without any further effort on our part we are destined to pass directly overhead, and this in a very few minutes' space at the pace at which we are scudding.

Here was really a case of surprise and of the need of getting guns rapidly into action, and the incident served to show that our equipment was in excellent working order. Over a windlass was hanging the loose end of a spool of twin insulated wire. To this



Adjusting the parachute which conveys messages from the balloon to the earth

a blasting charge of gun-cotton was quickly attached, then run out and lowered 120 feet below, and instantly fired electrically. A sharp report rang out, short, high-pitched, and ear-splitting, then a long pause, followed by a deep full thunder peal echoing back from earth and rolling on indefinitely. It was grand. It was also a valuable experiment in acoustics. On many occasions I had fired bombs in a similar way over broken country as well as over London house-tops, and had heard the roar of thunder given back from the many surfaces of the uneven ground below. But here for the first time I was firing over a dead flat, and eagerly waited to note any difference in effect. Let me then place on record the fact that the reverberations seemed undiminished.

But firing this blank cartridge was but the call to "attention," and without the smallest loss of time I was making the drum mark dots and dashes in the sky, my companions closely watching for any response from below. They had not long to wait. The ordinary wave of a signalman's flag could

hardly have been observed from overhead, inasmuch as in practice it is always struck in a vertical plane, and thus would have been ill-displayed. Perhaps this suggested itself to the troops below. At any rate, with remarkable alacrity a heliograph was brought out in front of a tent in the first camp, and made to commence a series of familiar flashes, distinct enough, but intermittent and undecipherable; and, indeed, this might have been anticipated, for, as was explained by a member of the signalling corps afterwards, with an object moving so rapidly as our balloon, it was almost impossible to keep that form of instrument truly directed.

However, the main object of our experiment had succeeded, and almost beyond our hopes. The camps were already in our rear, and, firing one last salute by way of farewell, we sped on towards the south-west, while, as will be seen, fortune still stood by us.

There is seldom any turning back in a balloon voyage. I will not say never, for once in my own experience I have actually



Finding the parachute with its message in a tree

gone out over the sea with a high west wind and been blown straight back again with a lower current from the opposite direction; but on this day, at any rate, though the winds would allow us to "tack" they would not suffer us to pause or to retrace our ground. And so we looked out over the plain for

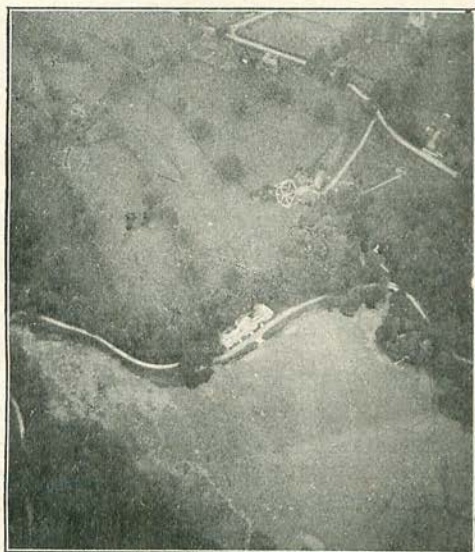
that are prone and dotted over a spot scarcely 100 yards across.

But it is the colour of the stones to which I would call attention. The camera refused to distinguish them at all, though but a short while before the dull-coloured heavy foliage in Lord Carnarvon's Park at Highclere had shown up fairly well in a photograph, as also the lake, though as will be seen it was but little relieved by reflected light.

The stones were practically invisible against the short dry grass, and a word may be said about them. They are the "Grey wethers" of the country, so called appropriately enough from their resemblance at a distance to the sheep on the plain; and perhaps how they came there is their chiefest wonder. There have been some notable guesses certainly. Sir C. Wren, for instance, would solve the difficulty by attributing them to a volcano—we might ask where—which had cast them, and pretty regularly, over hundreds of square miles! But the learned Dr. Stukeley, already quoted, goes one better, and maintains that no further explanation is needed than the rotation of the earth. In other words, they were formerly under the soil; but the chalk was soft and yielding, while the stones were hard and heavy, and the swing of the earth flung them clean through above! After this it is almost sad to learn that modern heresy finds in them possibly only the result of glacial action.

If it be noteworthy how the open plain was able to conceal its own big and bare boulders, perhaps there is equal interest afforded by the way in which it vividly displayed certain characters purely its own. With these we were sorely puzzled for a while. All over the plain at intervals there were roundish, strongly defined, markings. At one time we thought them ponds, or possibly enclosures of some kind, or, again, they might be rough mowings gathered into circles. But presently one of us had an inspiration. He declared they were fairy rings, and in default of a better suggestion I will confidently assert that they were so.

Circles of rank dark green grass may appear on pastures from various causes. Sometimes they are simply the boundary tracks of tethered animals. Sometimes, again,



Highclere Park and water. This photo was taken from the balloon

fresh objects, and what we saw, or thought we ought to see, was the actual site of Stonehenge "right ahead."

The old cromlech afforded a useful study for the signaller or marksman—a study in contrast. The sun, which was within two hours of its setting, had temporarily gone behind a cloud, and there were no shadows; yet the light was still good and our height less than a mile. For all that, however, Stonehenge was to us in hiding. This was, of course, partly due to our particular point of view, for the grandeur of the stones lies in their towering height. Raised more than twelve feet above the plain, to the ordinary visitors their summits show clear against the sky-line, and thus are imposing beyond words; but regarded from above, the object presented is at best but Stonehenge in ground plan—a few stones ill seen, save those

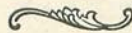
they are the soured herbage on the outside of where grass has in a wet season remained long in cock until black and fungoid. In this case the circles are necessarily small, but when they are of large dimensions, as in the case presented to us, they can be produced by nothing else than the outward spreading, through many years, of the well-known "Fairy Ring Champignon" which renders the grass rank wherever the previous year's growth has decayed.

But Salisbury Plain is not all plain, any more than London is all bricks and mortar. The ordinary observer makes a great mistake about both places, and maybe the aeronaut is the only one able to set him right. The blocks of London houses really consist of but mere fringes of buildings with courts and clearances within. So too the grand wilderness of Wilts is not all wild, but cultivated land is dotted everywhere, and after a sail of two hours we thought we might well be nearing civilised parts somewhere. At least we determined to learn if this were so, and so the valve line was pulled and the earth climbed up towards us, and

very soon there was a shouting and a trooping up of the natives of the country. But we did not want their assistance beyond a word of information. "How far are we from the nearest railway station?" we ask. And the foremost runner, already dodging the lively end of the trail rope answers assuringly: "A matter of seventeen mile; be yer coming down, master?" "Well not just here," we naturally answer, adding, "Have a care there!" as we empty a bag of sand, and quickly leave our disappointed friend far below in gaping wonderment.

And sailing up into space once more we take one last giant stride across the plain, climbing up until the eye can catch the distant site of Sarum, the city of a thousand years ago, and, hard by, the peerless spire of Salisbury.

Here we had reached an appropriate goal, and the limit of historic ground. Already a hard straight line was drawn across our view by some ruthless railway. 'Twere well to end up here. And so, though unwillingly, we left the sky while yet it was flooded with warm sunlight, and the sea a dozen miles distant.



A Daughter of the Sea*

By Amy Le Feuvre, Author of "Olive Tracy," "Probable Sons," &c.

Illustrated by Harold Piffard

CHAPTER XXIII

CUTHBERT'S STORY.

Where'er I roam, whatever realms to see,
My heart, untravell'd, fondly turns to thee.

GOLDSMITH.

"AND now, Cuthbert, begin from the very beginning and tell me all about it."

Una was sitting close to her husband that first evening. They were by themselves in the drawing-room. Mr. Carteret had retired early to bed; he was not so stupefied with drink as to be unaware that his presence would not be desirable on the present occasion. A bright wood fire was

burning on the hearth, and two comfortable chairs were drawn up to it. Cuthbert was rested and refreshed; but as his wife let her eyes dwell on his face with deep content, she noted some worn and weary lines that used not to be there.

He began his story at once.

"We had good weather down to Plymouth. I got my business done quickly and satisfactorily as far as I could see. Of course, I know well the time it takes to make any improvements round the coast; but I fancy I convinced them of our need of a stronger force of coastguards in these parts. We got away in due time. I thought I should be home so soon that there was no need to

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