

## London from Aloft.

“UP in a balloon, boys!” gaily snorts the band; “Yah, ber-loon!” howls the street-boy; and every man cricks his neck till his hat falls off behind when a balloon starts

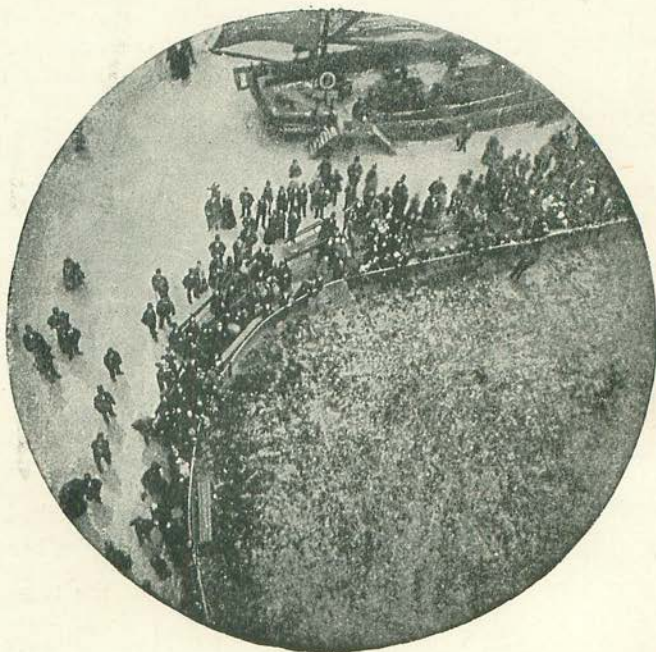
from a public ground; and, long after the aeronauts are floating in the silent softness above, and the bandsmen have begun another tune, the cricking of necks still goes on, and for miles below the track of the big silk bag people rush out of door and pop heads out of window, and stare till the diminishing brown ball vanishes in the clouds or becomes hidden behind tall buildings; whereupon necks are straightened, and things proceed as usual. Probably no single man, woman, or child who thus has stared at a balloon within the hundred years or so in which balloons have existed, but has longed to experience, at any rate for a little while, the sensation of riding on the air and gazing at the great world below; but most haven't made the experiment, because balloons are wayward birds, and leave no man a will of his own as to the route—not to speak of dropping into the sea and bursting at an awkward moment.

These are the reflections of those below, who let “I dare not” wait upon “I would,” but those who know much of the matter know that the proportion of accidents to ascents is a very small one indeed, and little to be regarded in considering an ordinary trip on a fine day—such a trip, for instance, as has been again and again performed of late in Mr. Percival Spencer's balloon, “City of York,” starting from the grounds of the Naval Exhibition.

All this notwithstanding, there still remain those who will not easily be persuaded to practical “balloonacy”—as somebody calls it—and for the benefit of such we proceed to make an ascent in Mr. Spencer's balloon, carrying, in deputy for their eyes, an instantaneous “Kodak” camera.

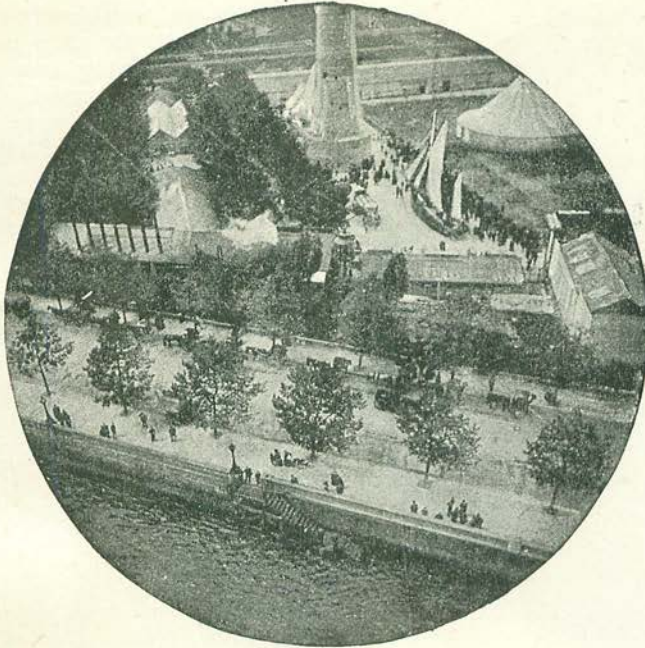
Slowly and tediously, in the eyes of the impatient passengers, the gas swells the great silk bag, which sways and wobbles the more as it fills. When at last the proper degree of rotundity is arrived at, the ring is fixed in its proper place, and the car is connected to the ring. We have half a ton of ballast in bags of fifty pounds each, and a basket full of lighter ballast—no mere uninteresting, wasteful sand with which to sprinkle eyes and heads below, but neat little circulars, conveying information about a particular kind of whisky to thirsty souls who stare upward. We have also a long rope with a grapnel of great spikiness, with which to claw hold of the sinful world at such time as it may seem desirable to alight upon it.

These things being satisfactory, we get into the car with as much dignity as possible, in view of the popular admiration which surrounds us. Mr. Spencer, however, climbs up on to the ring, and this proceeding attracting to him more than his due share of public notice, we feel resentful, until we reflect that, after all, the car seats are a good deal the safer places. Then a rope is slipped, and—the grounds of the



“OUR FIRST PICTURE”: THE NAVAL EXHIBITION GROUNDS.





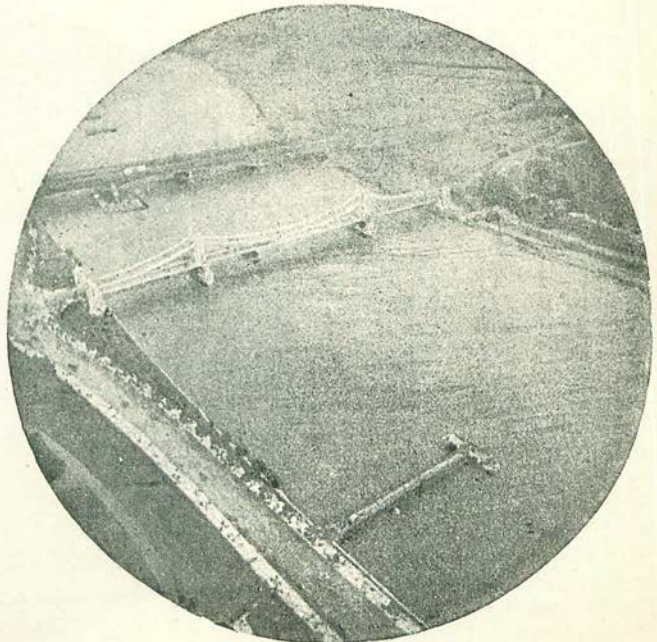
THE EMBANKMENT AND EXHIBITION GROUNDS.

Naval Exhibition, with all the people thereupon, begin to sink away from under us. We look down upon a thousand up-turned faces and open mouths, and we press the button of the detective camera. Snap! We have our first picture. But now that we look again at all those fast-receding people, it becomes plain that they cannot be people at all; they are black cribbage pegs, stuck carelessly into holes, and leaning in all kinds of impossible directions. Perhaps, however, since they move, they are people after all, in which case the yellow ground near the trawler must be a skating-rink, and they must all be in the act of curling about on the outside edge, at angles portending numberless "howlers." For such is the appearance of a crowd from a rising balloon.

Now the people become neither skaters nor cribbage pegs, but a larger kind of ant, and the Exhibition grounds and buildings seem an architect's coloured plan

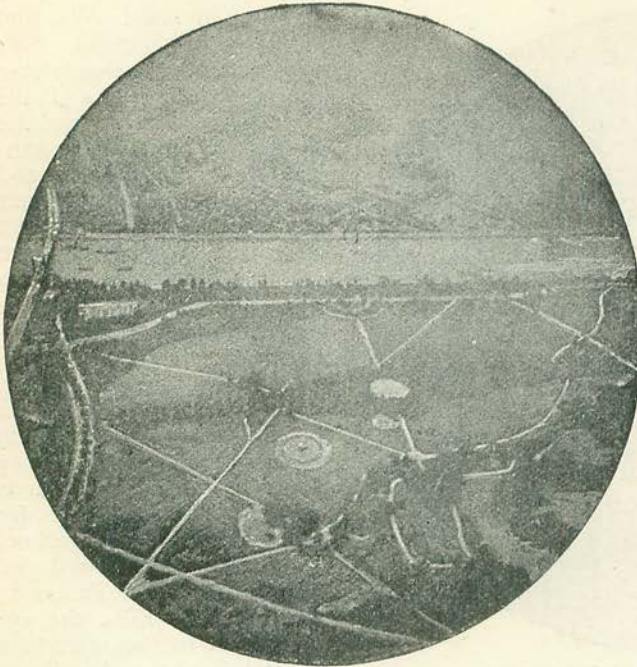
on a small scale. We find ourselves in a current of air which carries us slowly over the Embankment and the river. We have snapped the shutter of our camera northward, over Embankment and grounds; and now, at a greater elevation, we turn to the other side, and take our third picture—of the river, Victoria Pier and two bridges, the dark railway bridge contrasting well with Chelsea bridge, glorious in white, yellow, and gold. But here stretches before us a picture which neither camera nor pen may do justice to, for London is all below, lying away for miles in every direction. From Richmond to the docks, from the Crystal Palace to the northern hills, the eye may sweep by the mere turn of the head; and still we rise and rise. Away through

the centre of the mighty panorama lies the Thames, like an inlay of shining steel, crossed by bridge after bridge, each growing narrower and blacker away toward the docks, where the ship-masts stand like fields



VICTORIA PIER AND CHELSEA BRIDGE.





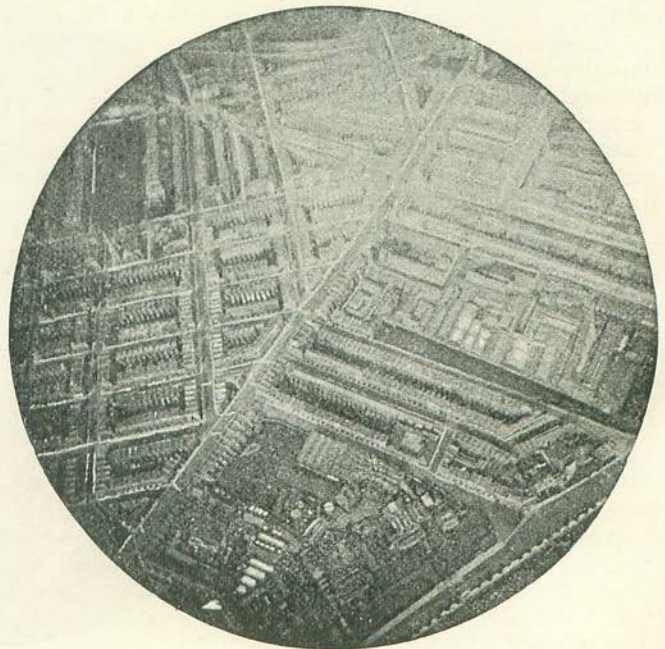
BATTERSEA PARK.

of hop-poles. We have crossed the river, and below us is a large green plan, traversed by geometrical white lines. It is Battersea Park. Again we reach for the camera, and have another picture, taking in the park and the river beyond, and as much as possible of the town beyond that, slightly obscured by light wreaths of smoke. And now our direction changes. The lower currents of air have been variable, and we have been travelling in a different direction to that taken by the clouds overhead. Now, however, all winds seem to join from the south-west, and we recross the river. Far, far away below us are myriad roofs—it is Pimlico—and of these we take a photograph, as we hang somewhere over Grosvenor Station, just before the throwing out of certain ballast, which causes a rapid ascent. The streets may well be recognised in the photograph. Stretching right across in an oblique direction, almost through the middle of the picture is Lupus-street. Crossing it may be seen

Denbigh-street and Claverton-street, while, on the left, lying parallel, and joining Lupus-street at a different angle to Denbigh-street, are St. George's-road, Cambridge-street, with its church, Alderney-street and Winchester-street. Ranelagh-road and Rutland-street may be seen on the right.

Now we rise, and the little white streaks, which are streets, grow narrower still. Travelling still toward the north-east, we attain a height of 5,000 feet—just about a mile. Below us are Vincent-square, and the great Millbank Prison. Here we expose our sixth plate. In the picture the strange-looking hexagonal star, built up of pentagons, is Millbank Prison; Vincent-square is the dark patch to the left. The small round white things, near the prison, which look like iced birthday-cakes, are great gaso-

meters; to the right of the picture the river is seen, with Lambeth, Westminster, Charing Cross, and Waterloo Bridges; the darker patch up the picture, on the left, where the smoke and mist begin to obscure



PIMLICO.



detail, is St. James's Park ; on the south side of the river, St. Thomas's Hospital may be discerned, by the foot of Westminster Bridge ; and by the other end of the same bridge are the Houses of Parliament.

We are now in the midst of such a silence as exists nowhere on earth. In the most solitary parts of the land the air is always filled with unnoticed sounds—the running, working, and flying of insects ; the rustle of leaves or grass ; or the trickle and splash of water. Here there is nothing—absolutely nothing—for minutes together. One talks in order to make some sound and put an end to the odd feeling of soundlessness ; and the voice makes the surrounding stillness the more intense. Then, perhaps, comes faintly from below the toot of a steam-tug's signal, or the muffled shriek of a locomotive engine ; and all seems stiller than before.

The streets are mere alternating lines of black and white, and it takes a keen eye and a long sight to detect, even on the largest buildings, of which some sort of a side view is possible, the specks that mean doors and windows.

The balloon has turned half round since starting, so that he on the seat first looking south now looks north, and *vice versa*. This motion, like all other motion in this wonderful machine which carries us where the wind wills, is quite imperceptible. We are in a perfect stillness, while clouds above and the earth below move this way or that, as may be the case. The air is not the air of London, but that of the Lake Country on a clear day—bright, clean, and fresh. And so we pass on, over the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, and Buckingham Palace.

Presently all below us grows just a little indistinct, as with a thin mist. At the same time the air grows cooler, and moist to the face. Above there is no blue sky—beyond the edge of the great gas bag it is white ; below it is foggier. Then all is densely white around, above, and below. We are in a cloud.

Suddenly we bound above the cloud, and all is warm sunshine. Below, the thick,

glistening, down-white clouds stretch away right and left in heavy folds ; and on this great white surface lies, twenty or thirty yards off, the clear, sharp-cut shadow of our balloon, perfect in every part. Above, the sky is deep and blue, flecked in a place or two with tiny streaks of cloud, which, Mr. Spencer tells us, must be 20,000 feet



MILLBANK AND ITS SURROUNDINGS.

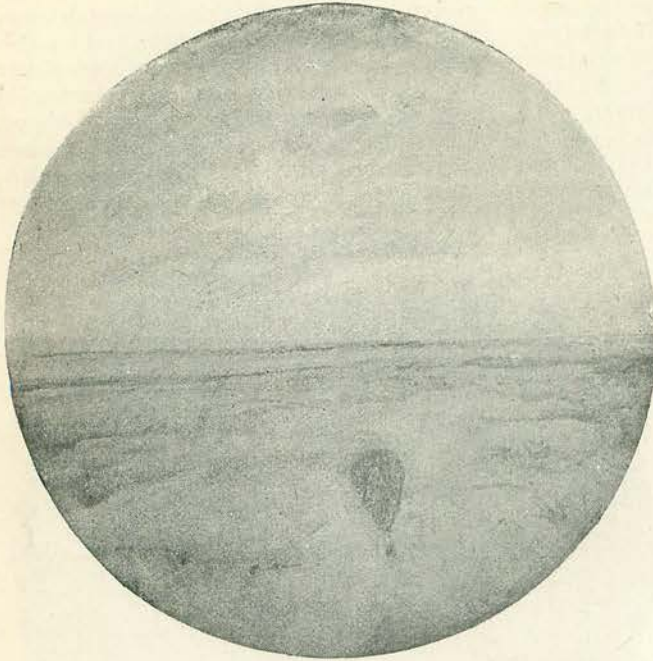
from the earth. We ourselves have not quite reached 8,000 feet.

Here we float in the great solitude, a little planet all by ourselves, with the blue sky and the sun above, and below the rolling clouds, which, in their season, bless and afflict the world far away lower still, with rain, hail, thunder, and lightning. It is a wrench to the mind at such a time as this to bring the thoughts back to so prosaic an article as a warranted detective camera with all the newest improvements, but it has to be done. For are not the readers of *THE STRAND MAGAZINE* waiting to see what clouds are like from above ?

We know that a photograph will not do justice to the splendour before us, but we touch the button ; and we have our seventh picture, shadow and all complete.

There is a smell of gas, which is a sign that the balloon has attained the utmost height consistent with the weight it has to carry. Up through the opening we can see into the balloon above, and through this





CLOUDS AND BALLOON SHADOW.

opening hangs the cord communicating with the valve at top. All seen through this hole is a transparent yellow, where the bright sun shines through the silk.

Our shadow on the clouds, which had been growing gradually smaller, now enlarges again as we fall. Soon it is nearly of full size, and then it becomes dim. The blue sky and the sun above look hazy, and round about we see and feel the cold mist. The shadow has vanished and we are in the white, moist cloud again. Down, down, down, although we feel it not, till the fog thins, becomes a mist, then a haze, and then vanishes, and we see mother earth below us again, and a white instead of a blue sky above.

But where is London? Where are the streets and the great buildings like pill-boxes, the shining river, and the bridges? Gone. All below is a vast patchwork quilt of varying colours and texture, green and yellow predominating, with no two patches of the same size or shape. It is the open country away in the north-west part of Essex, and what we see is a smiling English landscape of fertile fields. That glorious golden yellow is corn, and in those fields where it reddens we can point to the more forward of the crops. The hedges we only see as a join, and not a thick nor clumsy join either. The white streaks with the

easy curves are roads and lanes, and the dark, heavily piled velvet is a wood.

We are away from under all clouds, and the sun shines gloriously over everything. Look below and a little forward in the direction of our course. A dark spot flies fast over the bright patchwork, clearer in the yellow and pale green, less distinguishable in the heavy brown and the deep pile of the woods. It keeps exact pace with us, being always a little in front and to the right. It is the balloon's shadow again, now lying on the earth 4,000 feet below.

It is a magnificent map which lies below us; but to the untrained eye all is as flat as in any other map, but the experienced Mr. Spencer can point out hills and high grounds. There is the Great

Eastern Railway line. Follow the gravelly streak with the eye, and a little ahead you will find it looks broader. That is a cutting, consequently the ground rises there. Look a little further, and the line seems to end abruptly, beginning again a short distance further on. That is a tunnel, and we know that the rising ground has become a hill, and the space which breaks the line is the summit. Mr. Spencer can even judge pretty accurately, from the curves in the roads, where land rises and falls, and tells us that it is generally safe in these parts to assume that a long strip of uncultivated land marks the side of a hill.

For some time we follow the railway—a beautifully clean-cut line, with here and there a graceful, sweeping curve. By its side winds the river Stort, flowing to join the Lea a few miles behind us. There is also a canal, and both canal and river are mere tiny trickling threads of quicksilver. Away to the left lies a buff-coloured road following the same direction as the railway, the canal, and the river, and all four lie like a loose little bunch of coloured cords. Now we recognise the locality. We have lately passed Harlow, and the two or three little roofs which we are leaving away on the left are Sawbridgeworth. On we go above specks of villages till we pass over Bishop's Stortford—a mere little group of match boxes.



On and still on, with the railway line always in sight; and now we begin to fall faster, for a cold air-current has caused the gas to contract. As we come within nearer range we prepare to make another photograph. We are about to pass over a private house, with conservatories, stabling, and other out-buildings, close by where several roads converge. Another snap and we have photograph number eight.

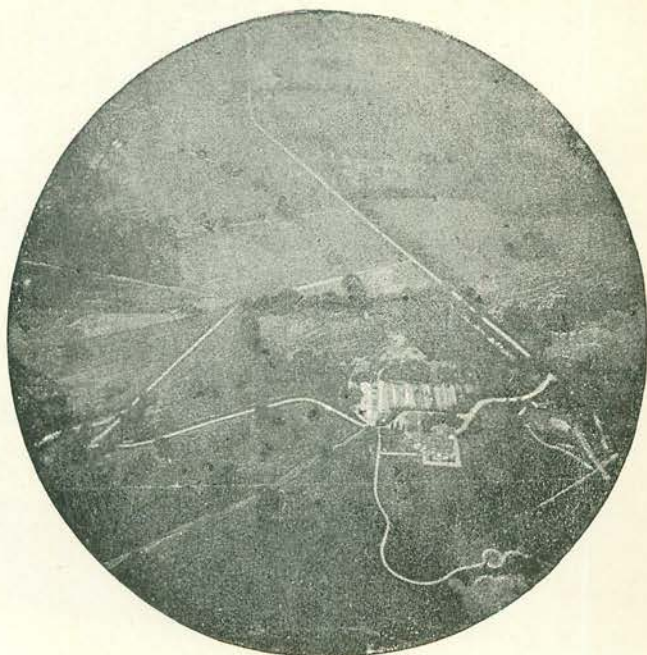
Now, as we near Saffron Walden, we fall very low indeed. That is to say, we get to an elevation of 500 feet, which Mr. Spencer calls very low, but which strikes us as quite long enough a fall to satisfy anybody. Then we get lower still, and we can see an intelligent peasantry dropping whatever they hold and starting off towards us at the double from all directions. Our trail-rope is 200 ft. long, and presently it touches. Then, with the relief from its weight, we descend slower and slower, then the car touches, and we rise with a bounce, only to settle down again in a minute or so. And so we swing merrily along at about twenty miles an hour 150 ft. off the ground, with 50 ft. of trail-rope behind us, which, at its pace, eludes every effort of many sons of the soil to grab it. With many a joyous gibe at the top of our voices for those below we sail along, and wonder whether they understand our airy chaff or mistake it for cries of distress.

At last an agricultural gentleman in a suit of corduroy and clay manages to intercept the rope and catch it, with a yell of triumph. Mr. Spencer shouts to him to let go, but he hangs on valiantly till the rope goes taut, and then—well, there is a hedge in the way, and for a single second we get a view of the soles of the agricultural gentleman's very large boots, and then he is sitting in a cabbage-field at the other side of the hedge, and wondering what that earthquake has done with his hat, while the rope drags away in the next field.

Now we cut off a corner of Suffolk with our trailing rope, and pull it into Cambridge-shire. The wind quiets down, and we go at something under fifteen miles an hour,

as the sun sinks away in the west, and the blue of the sky in the east deepens and deepens. All this time Mr. Spencer has regulated our height by a judicious expenditure of ballast, and now we are low enough to hear the voices of the enthusiastic populace, as they rush out of door with cries of "Balloon! Balloon!"

Soon we go very slowly indeed, and can talk to the people almost as easily as from the top of an omnibus. One fine old farmer in brown gaiters attracts Mr. Spencer's attention, and we think to take a rise out of the old gentleman by asking the way to Newmarket. With an innocence which almost reconciles us to returning to the deceitful world again, he tells us that we must turn to the left; whereupon Mr. Spencer—mad wag, that Mr. Spencer—swarms up into the ring, and, seizing the neck of the balloon, whirls it round with



NORTH-EAST ESSEX—OVER THE GREAT EASTERN RAILWAY.

great energy, and asks our friend if that is enough. No; just a little more, he thinks. One more whirl, and then, "All right, cap'en, now you're right!" What a delightful old gentleman!

But now the wind shifts, and we find, after all, that Newmarket is like to be our destination. It is about ten miles ahead, and as we make towards it we are confident that the good old farmer standing



below will never allow any man to tell him that he never saw a steering balloon.

Near Newmarket we examine the ground, but it is woody, and unfavourable for a descent; so up we go again, brushing tree-tops on our way over Lord Rutland's park. Clear of this, we open the valve and fall once more. At fifty feet high out goes the grapnel, and is immediately surrounded by a score of men. And so down we come, fair and softly, after nearly eighty miles of air travelling. Mr. Spencer proceeds to deflate the balloon, and in this operation we catch him with our camera, and so take our very last picture of this memorable day—this time, however, with a full three-seconds exposure, for the light is not what

it was. Then, the balloon having been most marvellously packed into the basket, we scale a cart and trot off, with many jolts and joggles, for Newmarket station, and with little love for road travelling after nearly four hours in the "City of York" balloon. And so home, as our old friend Pepys might have said, with much pretty discourse, and vowing that many things might be worse than an afternoon in a balloon; while in time of war, when one might snap the merry camera on the wrathsome foe below in all his dispositions and devices, and in good safety drop the joyous bombshell upon the top of his hapless head—forsooth what a fine thing must be that!

