

“I CUT THE LINE.”

(See page 127.)

Illustrated Interviews.

No. XLVII.—MR. HENRY COXWELL

By HARRY HOW.



SEAFORD is a charmingly quiet little seaside resort on the south coast. It is almost an ideal spot for a rest. I had left the train at Newhaven and walked along the somewhat rough beach for about an hour when the little village came into sight. It was my first visit to Seaford, and I had come down with the anticipation of spending a few hours with the veteran balloonist, Henry Coxwell. The only address I had was that of "Henry Coxwell, Seaford." Just as I was leaving the beach, I beckoned a little girl and inquired of her whether she knew where a gentleman of the name of Coxwell lived. She looked up, and, without answering my question, she pointed her finger in the direction of a house, where stood a tall, well-knit figure—an old man with grey beard, and a skull cap on his head; a black velvet waistcoat—such a black velvet waistcoat!—and a frock-coat. He seemed to know that I was asking for him. He waved his hand towards me, beckoning me to come on, and in a very few seconds that hand was holding mine. It was Mr. Coxwell himself, who had been watching for my arrival.

"It blows cold over the Downs, eh?" he said. "Come in. This is a lovely spot; just suits me. Why, do you know, from my window on a bright day, I can see the grand stand on the race-course over the Downs." Then, tapping me on the shoulder, the veteran made that always welcome and suggestive remark, "Now, what about lunch?"

And what a charming little lunch it was! No servant—it was her day out, and I was

glad to learn that, although I was coming, a thoughtful master had not upset the arrangements for her occasional visit to Newhaven.

But we had somebody to wait upon us. It was an old ex-coastguardsman, and a very good and kind fellow he was. It was he who cooked the delicious Southdown mutton, and watched the saucepan to see that the potatoes did not get watery; it was he who laid the table and looked after our wants. A fine, stalwart, strapping man, though he must be fifty if a day, was Mr. Pride, with his pea-jacket and top-boots, his ruddy face and twinkling eyes. Mr. Coxwell told me what a willing help Mr. Pride was; and the old coastguardsman sang out: "Oh, yes; I always heave to and help a ship in distress."

The table was cleared. The Southdown mutton disappeared, and the fresh-pulled celery was a thing of the past; and then the old coastguardsman came in with the glasses.

"You see, sir," he said, turning to me by way of explanation, "directly we have finished dinner on board ship we pipe the grog."

"Aye, aye," said Mr. Coxwell.

So we lit up our pipes, and we "piped the grog," and we chatted together till the sun set over the Downs.

I have seldom listened to a more delightful story of child-life than that told to me by Mr. Coxwell that wintry afternoon. He was born at Wouldham Castle, near Rochester, on March 2nd, 1819.

The little fellow's father was a naval officer; and he was only two years old when he left the parsonage where he was



MR. HENRY COXWELL.
(Taken at the time of his last ascent.)
From a Photo. by Negretti & Zambra.

born, and went with his father on board H.M.S. *Colossus*; and the veteran, as he puffs away at his pipe, almost remembers with a shiver how he used to be ducked into the water from the stage alongside the old "74."

One has not been sitting and chatting long with Mr. Coxwell before one is impressed with his marvellous memory for detail, especially in respect to matters associated with his schooldays. He drew a vivid picture of the manner in which they used to lash the soldiers with the cat in those old times, when the drums and the fifes used to play in order to drown the cries of the unfortunate fellow, who was secured to the red-painted triangle.

Little Coxwell was a plucky lad. He and his brother once stood up before a big bully, three times their united size, and fought him to the bitter end, because he had said an unkind word against their father.

The first balloon he ever saw was that used by Mr. Green in an ascent when he passed over Chatham Dockyard. It was no difficult matter to realize the picture which the Grand Old Man of ballooning drew of himself, as a little fellow hurrying along over the fields, with a huge spy-glass, some 16in. round by 2½ft. long, almost as big as himself, under his arm, anxious to get a good view. This was in 1828, and it was not long after that he made his first balloon himself. He started by making little parachutes.

"You know," said Mr. Coxwell, "they used to go up in a strong wind, instead of coming down in

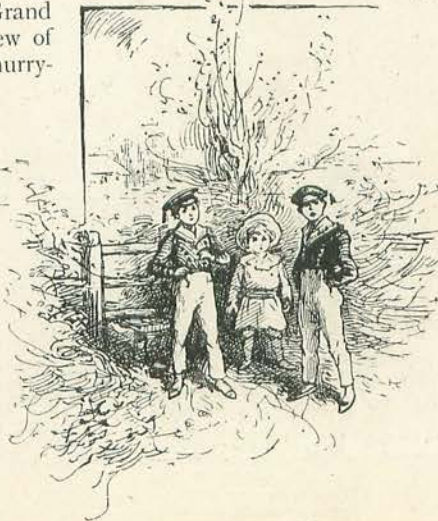


"A LITTLE FELLOW WITH A HUGE SPY-GLASS."

one; we used to work them by contrary effect in those days.

"I may just mention that since the descents of Professor Baldwin a few years ago at the Alexandra Palace, it has generally been supposed that parachuting is practically new. Of course this is not so, as descents by parachute were made early in the present century.

"My little parachutes used to take me half an hour to make, and I have



"MY FIRST BALLOON."

known them go up a thousand feet. Then, from parachutes I got to making paper balloons. My first one was a fire balloon; it caught alight. My second attempt, however, was all right. I sent it up from a sheltered spot at the back of our stable. This balloon was about three or four feet in diameter, made of paper and varnished to hold gas.

"On leaving Chatham I went to school

at Camberwell, and I used to watch Green make his ascents from the Surrey Zoological Gardens. I used to get up in a big tree, and deliver a sort of little lecture from it to my schoolfellows below as to exactly what was happening to the balloon; and as I used to sit on one of the branches my feelings even then were that I wished some day to take up this study myself, though I never had any idea of taking to it professionally.

"I had a great ambition to go up with Green. Curiously enough, although I knew him well, he would never take me. I think he used to regard me as rather a dangerous young man. He once said, 'There is something about that young Coxwell's eyes which tells me that he wants to get all the information from me that he can, and then turn his knowledge to ulterior motives. I would not take him up for love or money.' He used to charge £5 for an ascent;

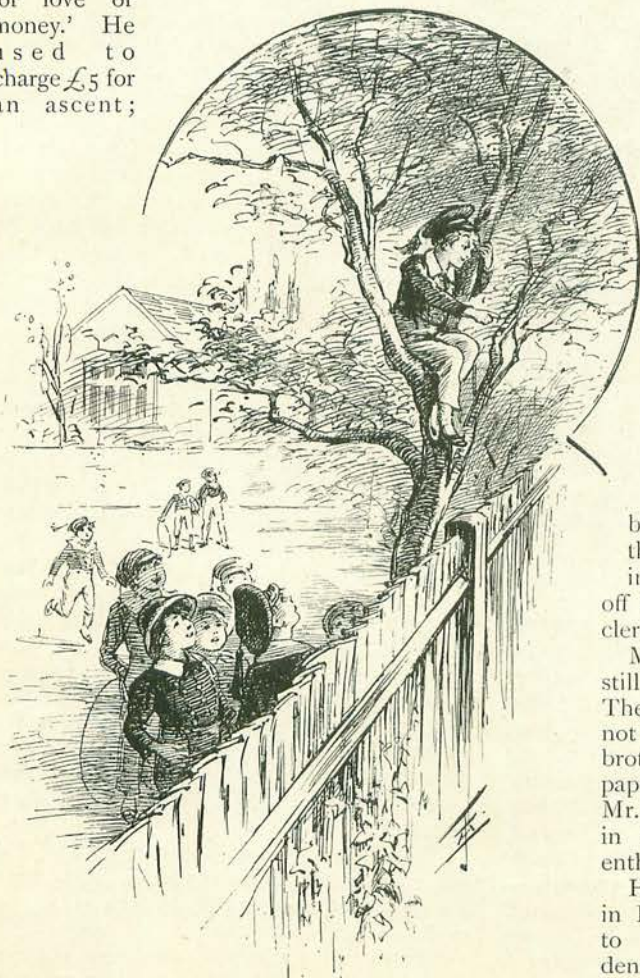
and I have known occasions when, rather than take me when his car was not full, he would carry up a milkman or a policeman.

"My father died when I was thirteen. He had broken three ribs in boarding a Spanish ship in the time of Nelson, and I do not think he ever really recovered from this. By this time, I had changed a blue jacket for a black coat, and the question arose as to what I should become. One of my sisters suggested I would make a good clergyman, but I fear this did not meet with my approval. All that time I was endeavouring to find out what I could about ballooning. I talked of nothing else but balloons, and I think I may say that even at this age I was fairly well up in the science of aerostation.

"It was about this time that a remarkably large balloon was built by Messrs. Gye and Hughes, after the plans of Mr. Green. I was to have started for Amsterdam to take up a position as a merchant's clerk, but I made up my mind to see the ascent of this balloon first. You may imagine what it was like, when I tell you that thirty-six policemen were placed around the balloon during its inflation; forty-one iron staves of 56lb. each were attached to the cordage; and even after the policemen had been compelled to put their staves through the meshes to save their hands being cut by the cords, other persons had to be called in to assist. It was a magnificent sight when that balloon went up, and I was anything but content the next morning, after having seen it, to trip off to Amsterdam to try my hand at clerking."

Mr. Coxwell went to Amsterdam, still suffering from balloon fever. The counting-house, however, did not agree with him, and when his brother one day put into his hand a paper containing the account of Mr. Green's trip across the Channel in a balloon from Vauxhall, his enthusiasm was again stirred up.

He only remained a short time in Holland, after which he returned to London and began to study dentistry. "You know," said Mr. Coxwell, "that I am a dentist still,



"I USED TO WATCH GREEN MAKE HIS ASCENTS."

and it was sometimes very amusing, when I used to make my ascents from the Crystal Palace, to have a patient call on me at my house in Tottenham to have a tooth drawn, and ask if I were in; and then, on my arrival, staring at me with amazement and astonishment: 'Why, I saw you go up in the sky last night! Are you really Mr. Coxwell?' And I can assure you that it frequently took me some time to convince my visitors that I was really one and the same man.

"My first trip in a balloon was made with Mr. Hampton from the White Conduit Gardens, Pentonville, on Monday, August 19th, 1844. I assumed the name of 'Wells,' in order that I might not give too much anxiety to my friends. This was my first real ascent, and we descended in a meadow belonging to Mr. Augustin Rust, at East Ham Hall. And what a sensation it was. You are up, up, up, almost before you can realize it! You do not appear to move, but seem to remain perfectly stationary; and as you are seated in the air, the panorama of Nature which is opened out to you is positively indescribable. You watch the green fields, and the church spires, and the houses all becoming smaller and smaller.

They seem to be going away from you while you sit and gaze at them, lost in wonderment.

"Here, just look at this!" and the veteran shouts out to the old coastguardsman, "Pride, heave to with the atlas!" "Aye! Aye! Mr. Coxwell!" "Now, there is no getting away from that!" says the veteran, pointing to the map. "There you have the highest mountains in the world; there is Everest, 29,002ft. ! But see that little balloon above the topmost peak; look at it, sir—37,000ft.—that was the biggest ascent I ever made, and the greatest height ever attained by any balloonist!" "That is what I call rising a bit in the world, eh, sir!" said the old coast-

guardsman. "Ah," said Mr. Coxwell, "but unfortunately in this case you have to come down in the world again."

Mr. Coxwell assured me that he had so studied the matter before making this great ascent that he was almost prepared for each phase of the many great changes involved in passing from a dense to a lighter atmosphere, up to an elevation where the pressure is so extremely reduced that, even at such a height as this, the clouds were so few that he and his companion, Mr. Glaisher, had magnificent views of villages and towns—in fact, a little world seemed to lie beneath them. "Indeed,"

he remarked, "once in passing over Birmingham at a height of six miles, the atmosphere was so clear that the smoke was to be seen coming out of the chimney-pots."

He told me a somewhat interesting story of how the balloonist is regarded by a spectator on *terra-firma*. "We were coming back from an ascent near Birmingham," he said, "when we descended near a railway station. The station-master came up to us. 'Are you the gent who went up a few hours ago, sir?' he asked. 'Yes,' I answered. 'Well,' he said, 'it is very curious, but a toy balloon passed over here about the size of my hat about half a mile high soon



MR. JAMES GLAISHER.
(Companion of Mr. Coxwell in his high ascent.)
From a Photo. by A. J. Melhuish.

after you left.' 'Oh, that was not a toy balloon,' I assured him, 'it was myself and Mr. Glaisher, and at the moment you saw us we were six miles high!' It seemed rather curious to me, because the balloon which appeared a toy one to the station-master contained from 90,000 to 100,000 cubic feet of gas, and was 85ft. in height and 56ft. in diameter.

"Pride, heave to with the cigars!" The old man puffed away contemplatively for a few moments, then, suddenly turning to me, said:—

"I will tell you about the most perilous ascent I ever made. It was in 1847, when

we went up from the Vauxhall Gardens in a balloon with over 60lb. weight of fireworks. Albert Smith, who at that time had started *The Man in the Moon* as a rival to *Punch*, for which periodical the late George Augustus Sala was busily engaged in making engravings, accompanied me with two other gentlemen. Yes; July 7th, 1847. Just before the ascent was made a storm was brewing, and the manager of the gardens queried as to whether it would be safe to make the voyage. I had never made a night ascent before, but on being appealed to, I decided to go. Up we went, discharging the rockets and the Roman candles as we ascended. Suddenly the storm burst out in all its fury. We were 4,000ft. above the surface of the earth. The balloon was rising higher and higher, when all at once a flash of lightning disclosed the fact that the balloon had rent fully 16ft., and we were falling head-long right over the West-end of London!

"For a moment I scarcely knew what to do, but soon collecting my thoughts, I flew up to the hoop of the balloon, and cut the line that connects the safety valve to the lower part of the balloon, so that as the gas escaped the lower hemisphere formed a sort of parachute." (See frontispiece.) "I am thankful to say that the balloon fell in the neighbourhood of Pimlico, the network being caught up by some scaffold-poles, which broke the force of the collision. I was the only one hurt, and that by a bystander, from whom I received a cut in the hand when he was trying to extract us from the network.

"Albert Smith, who, by-the-bye, it might interest you to know was a dentist like myself, behaved splendidly—he never uttered a word, never showed a sign of fear. I venture to think he really did not know the danger in which he was placed. Aye, such danger that it was a thousand to one against our ever escaping with our lives."

The mention of the late George Augustus Sala's name by Mr. Coxwell naturally led us both to become reminiscent, as readers of *THE STRAND MAGAZINE* will possibly remember that I gave an account of a long talk I had with that great journalist some two and a half years ago. Mr. Coxwell stated that Sala knew more about ballooning than any writer he ever met. He made a study of it when he was a boy, and he had a touch of balloon fever before he was twenty. It is interesting to chronicle the fact that the lectures which the great Gale gave on ballooning were all written by Sala. Sala only went up in a balloon once, and that was in 1851, from Kensington Gore, with a man named Chamberlain. The balloon burst and came down with a run; and ever after that, whenever Sala had the chance, notwithstanding the great love he had for ballooning, he always wrote characterizing that pursuit as dangerous unless skilfully managed.

After Mr. Coxwell's adventure with Mr. Albert Smith, it was suggested that he ought to own a balloon of his own. He refused for some time, saying that his family would strongly object to his becoming a professional.

However, in 1848, he became the director of a balloon, which he christened the "Sylph"; and he made his first ascent as a professional on April 10th of that year. I gathered the interesting information from the veteran that the "Sylph," with three other gentlemen and himself, would weigh 1,254lb., comprising balloon, netting and car, 400lb.; the voyagers, 612lb.; grappling and rope gear, 52lb.; coats, instruments, etc., 30lb.; and balloon, 160lb.

It was also in this year that Mr. Coxwell fulfilled numerous engagements in Belgium. He used to illustrate in Brussels the bombardment of a city, and the detonators which he threw out from his balloon made a noise equal to a nine-pounder.



MR. HENRY COXWELL.

(Taken at the Crystal Palace after a high ascent.)
From a Photo. by Negretti & Zambra.

He visited the principal towns in Germany and Bohemia, including a trip to the Field of Waterloo. In a volume of his reminiscences which Mr. Coxwell handed to me, the author gives a very vivid description of his impressions of the Field of Waterloo as seen from a balloon.

A balloon view of Waterloo, with the surrounding country and bold acclivities, fails entirely to convey the martial associations which those noted Belgic plains would be expected to arouse.

We felt hardly reconciled to the fact that on that cluster of fields, which looked so rural and cultivated, the fate of Europe had been decided in so great a sanguinary contest.

As our survey happened to be made in the same month as that on which the memorable battle was fought, the general appearances of Nature could not have been very dissimilar to what they were on June 17th, 1815, just when the British infantry bivouacked on the rising ground near the village, and the cavalry rested in those hollows in the rear.

It is true we gazed upon the landscape which was comparatively tame when unenlivened by the arms of Wellington, Blücher, and Napoleon.

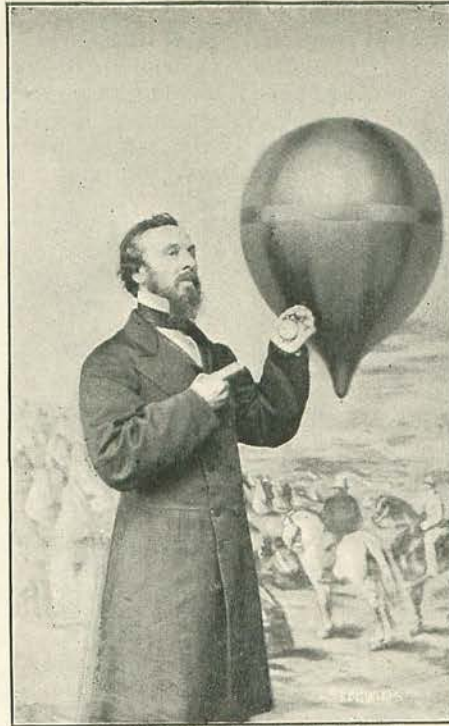
An aerial glance at that great historical picture would have indeed been a sight worth seeing. But the mere bird's-eye view of the sight was somewhat disappointing.

Could we have seen the down-trodden corn and rye, the clouds of smoke, the prancing horses and helmeted riders, the splendid French columns impetuously advancing against the solid squares of red—could we have heard the din and roar of musketry and cannon, and the wild hurrah of the last grand charge, then indeed the scene would have appeared fresh and imposing. Our bird's-eye view of Waterloo, so far from being lively and soul-stirring, was rather of a philosophical and contemplative character.

One could not pass over the ruins of Hougomont, or the farm-house of La Haye Saint, without thinking of the dust and ashes of countrymen and foes which were there scattered in profusion; when we recollected that on the small surface of two square miles 50,000 men and horses were ascertained to be lying, we can form some idea of the mouldering remains which lie beneath the ripening crops which presented themselves to our view.

The sun had just set on the peaceful plains in rosy and majestic grandeur. The glorious King of Day declined also on June 18th, thirty-three years before we passed over in a balloon. But how different the scene!

On that evening after the battle, when the cries of



MR. COXWELL LECTURING ON BALLOONING.
From a Photo. by H. N. King, Bath.

the wounded filled the air, as the roar of artillery ceased, and as night approached, the earth was red-dyed and sodden; but on this, inviting cheers of welcome came to us on all sides, and at Waterloo we met with a most friendly reception.

It was delightful to hear the veteran reading out his account of this unique visit to Waterloo. It was an impressive little picture—the sun setting over the sea, and casting its dying beams upon the face of the grand old balloonist, and the coastguardsman standing there close at hand. The old guardsman could only shout out an enthusiastic “Hear! hear,” and bring his fist down upon the table, which made the sea-shells rattle in a corner near the window.

Then the veteran, after he had once more reviewed the hour he had spent over that ever-famous battlefield, crossed the room, and opened the door and looked out quietly upon the sea, as though watching it all again. “Now, then,” he said, “heave to, we must not get sentimental. Pass the tobacco-box, Pride.” “Aye, aye, sir,” and the tobacco-box was piped, or rather the tobacco that was in it.

“I returned to England,” continued Mr. Coxwell, “from Germany, in 1851, at the end of the Great Exhibition. They told me the Exhibition was over, and I had come too late. ‘Have I?’ I said; ‘you shall see my name going up three times a week next year’; and I can assure you my promise came true. Early in the season, about Whitsuntide, Mr. Goulston had made a very fine new silk balloon, but he was unfortunately killed in the first ascent of it. This ascent occurred from Cremorne Gardens. The proprietor telegraphed to me to know if I would go up in Goulston’s balloon in the very car in which he lost his life. I went down to inspect the balloon, and said: ‘I shall have no objection whatever.’ But I had a shock, too. I remember just at this moment that when I looked into that car I saw some of

poor Goulston's brains which they had failed to take away. I took up one of Goulston's men to take charge of the necessary property. I went up about a mile. This was noised abroad, and engagements quickly followed.

"One of the four places I used to go up from was the 'Eagle,' in the City Road. I remember an ascent I once made with old Conquest, the father of the present George

demanding £2 for the damage we had done. We had a long argument with him, and I offered him a glass of wine, which he refused. Of course, we had not done a shilling's-worth of damage to his hedge. He made a tremendous row, and while he was noising, I quietly asked a bystander to bring in the grappling-iron out of the hedge, and, to their utter astonishment, sailed merrily away!"



"I OFFERED HIM A GLASS OF WINE."

Conquest. It was his birthday, and so we determined to commemorate it in the air—Mr. Conquest, myself, and Mr. John Allan. We took up some champagne with us. We had so arranged our trip that we should return to the 'Eagle,' and appear on the stage of a theatre before the audience after our aerial flight. We descended at a spot near Barnet. The grappling-gear lodged in a hedge, and a number of people were standing near. A tall, gaunt Yorkshireman, with a long, heavy stick, rushed up to us with a number of his fellow-labourers, and

Mr. Coxwell made his first appearance at the Crystal Palace in 1859, whilst his last ascent took place in 1885, when his balloon sailed round the city and suburbs of York.

So many ascents has this born balloonist made that he is practically unable to chronicle them all. His line, holding the grappling-iron, has been caught in a fog by a passing fishing-boat, swaying the balloon to and fro to the extreme danger of its occupant. He has ascended before Her Majesty and the late Prince Consort in a balloon which for this occasion he christened "Queen" at Leamington.



"CAUGHT BY A FISHING-BOAT."

Mr. Coxwell is not likely to forget the somewhat sensational experiences connected with this ascent. He had arranged to make captive ascents as the Queen and Prince Consort came past in their carriage during their progress through Warwickshire. This was done, and afterwards the balloon was held down to have a fresh supply of gas to enable it to make a final ascent in the evening. During that time a fresh breeze had sprung up, and the ascending power of the balloon was so much less than he had expected, that he had to ascend alone. The balloon struck against the spire of a church about 100 yds. from the gardens whence the ascent was made. He flew to the hoop in order to look up the neck of the balloon to make sure the silk was not torn. It seemed all right. He sailed away for twenty miles, coming down in a most remote district in the

neighbourhood of Chester-ton.

"The point is this," said Mr. Coxwell, when speaking of this incident, "that the weather-cock of that church had been taken off a day or two previous for regilding. Had it not been taken down, my balloon would have struck the steeple in such a position that it would have been rent by the weather-cock from top to bottom."

Mr. Coxwell made many important surveys for the British Association; and he merrily referred to the notions of a late Professor, who had an idea of his own for ascending six miles in an old balloon, which he had picked up at Cremorne Gardens. Mr. Coxwell, at his own expense, built a balloon and materially assisted the British Association in their scientific work.

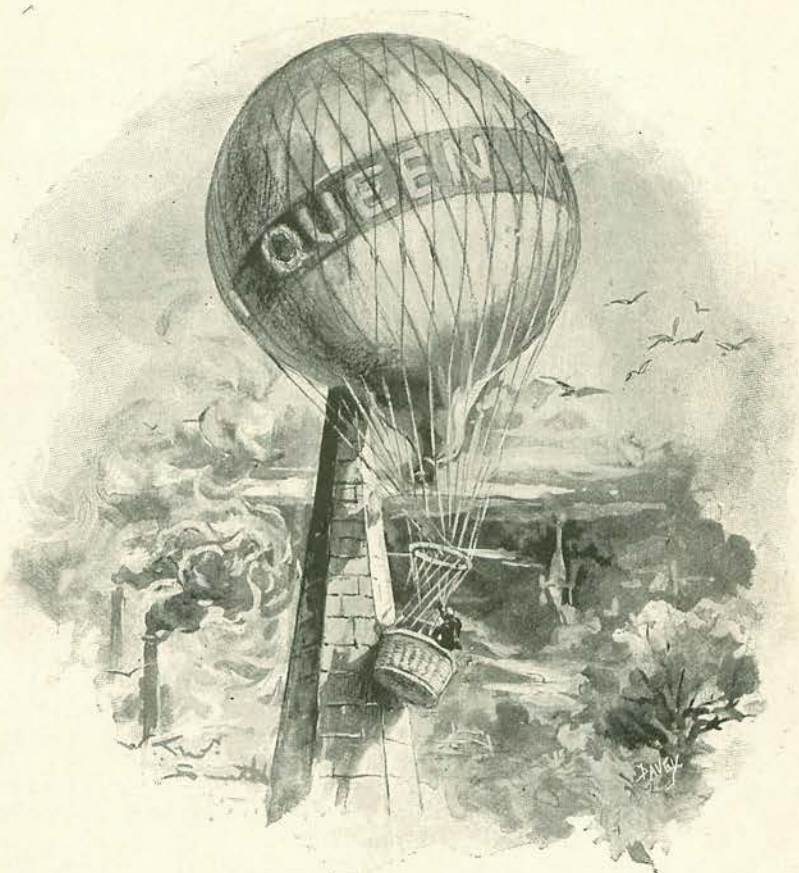
As far back as 1854 Mr. Coxwell demonstrated in public a new plan of signalling in the air for use in time of war. One of the newspapers of that time, after describing the aeronaut's venture, goes on to explain as follows:

"The aeronaut, who set in operation once more his signals, was well understood in the working of these by those who were in possession of the key to them; and they resemble somewhat those which were formerly used on the roof of the Admiralty. When he had reached a considerable altitude he liberated a number of pigeons which, he said, were usually auxiliaries for warfare. The idea is ingenious, and we must admit that the signals were worked with much dexterity."

His first real ascent in a military balloon was made in 1863, and, curiously enough, a canvas of the picture of this ascent forms the blind of the principal room of the veteran's cottage at Seaford. This room is on a level with the highway, and for some time Mr. Coxwell was annoyed by people coming and looking into his room, knowing

that it was the famous balloonist who lived there. The window is a large one, and the canvas just covers it up entirely, so at night Mr. Coxwell sits quietly within doors, and

£500; now you can make them of muslin at a cost of from £150 to £200. I do not think it will ever become fashionable. Ballooning is really an art. People look up at a



"THE BALLOON STRUCK AGAINST THE SPIRE OF A CHURCH."

chatting away with a friend, always having before him a view of his ascent from Thornhill, at Aldershot.

Before leaving Mr. Coxwell I asked if he considered ballooning would ever become popular or a fashionable pastime. "Well," he said, "ballooning is remarkably popular to-day to a certain extent, as it is now more used for acrobatic purposes and fancy acts. A balloon is a costly affair. When I was a young man they used to be made of expensive silk, and a good balloon would cost

balloon and think how easy it must be to sail along at the rate of eighty miles an hour, which I have done in my day. Then the great risk has always to be considered; and although people nowadays will risk anything to be fashionable, I do not think they will go as far as ballooning. But here is a curious fact: ballooning is of value for some pulmonary complaints—people who suffer from asthma. You see, you get into such pure air, and I know I always felt better after an ascent!"