

A WAR-BALLOON TRIP.

By CAPTAIN HERBERT C. PRICHARD.

Illustrated from photographs taken by the Author.



IN the autumn of 1894 it fell to my lot to make the longest and perhaps best run of the season in one of the Alder-shot war-balloons. The date was October 3, and anyone

who happened to note down the weather on that day will see that it was a gray day with a fair amount of wind of a rather gusty and threatening type.

Before starting we sent up a couple of pilot balloons, or *ballons d'essai*, as the French call them. These are small balloons, about 2 feet high, which rise rapidly, and show the exact direction of the upper wind and currents, and enable one to make a good forecast of the probable line of country.

Having carefully "set" a large

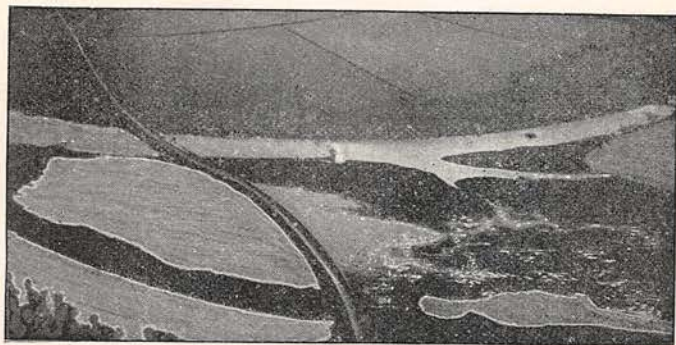
map on the ground, I quickly laid off the exact direction, and committed myself to the opinion that we should go in the direction of Maidenhead, Leighton Buzzard and Bedford. "Never prophesy unless you know" is a sound rule of life, but practically I knew, and the risk of proving a false prophet was not great, as the reader will see.

A few words to describe the balloon before we start. Its capacity was 10,000 cubic feet, which, from a civilian aeronaut's point of view, is small; but then the gas used was hydrogen, the lightest known and consequently the most buoyant. The balloon itself was not of silk—of which material everyone tells one that all balloons are made—but of ox-bladders laid on from five to seven thicknesses. An ingenious system of strapping serves to localise the effects of tears or rents and so minimise the risk of splitting. The whole is covered by a net which ends in

a loop. To this loop is attached by wooden toggles the six short stout ropes which carry the car—a stout basket about 5 feet long, 3 feet wide and 3 feet deep, in which two men can just sit comfortably facing one another. At the top of the balloon is the gas-valve, opened by means of a valve-line, which, running straight through the centre of the balloon, comes out at the bottom or petticoat. The flying end of this line is made fast to one of the car ropes in a position handy for use.

The principal gear carried consists of

grapnel and grapnel rope, knife in sheath, field-glass, aneroid to read 10,000 feet, thermometer, compass, maps and ballast (sand). Shortly after eleven o'clock we had all ready. As I said before, the wind was



THAMES FLOODED NEAR COOKHAM.

(Taken at a height of 1350 feet, when balloon was going at thirty miles an hour.)

gusty and rather threatening. So much was this the case that both Captain H. B. Jones, R.E. (who was in charge), and I, his sole companion, had fears lest Colonel Templer, the father of the Balloon School, might think discretion the better part of valour, and bid us "wait on the morrow." Whether or no he had any doubts we never knew, as the sergeant-major, finding that we had exactly the right "lift," quietly let the balloon glide off, as imperceptibly as the lamented Mr. Bardell glided out of this world to seek that repose which a custom-house could never afford—and then a Divisional Order itself could not have stopped us.

Steadily and quickly we rose, making due north, and leaving (time 11.25) the camp, which soon looked like a town, made on a large scale with children's bricks, and laid out with faultless precision, exactly as Mrs. Ewing describes it in her "Story of a Short Life." Passing over Farnborough, with its

easily recognised network of railways, we cross, ten minutes after starting, a quite extensive looking town, which for the minute, at a height of 1670 feet, I failed to recognise. One look however reveals the Staff College exactly below us, and no second look is needed to identify the place where I did "two years' hard" as we used to say. Directly after this we run into dense gray cloud, and can distinguish nothing clearly till we pass over Bracknell at 11.45. Twenty minutes later we see the Thames ahead, all the more distinct from being in flood, and at 12.10 cross it, about one mile east of Cookham. The photograph on the preceding page gives a good idea of the river, and more particularly of the extent of the floods.

So far we have been at an average height



LEIGHTON BUZZARD, ONE-AND-A-HALF MILES FROM THE SOUTH.
(Taken at a height of 2450 feet.)

of about 1400 feet, and it is astonishing how plainly one can see and hear at that height—see people abandoning their work, apparently without a pang, and hear them shouting up, "Who are you?" "Where have you come from? Where are you going?" "Come down and have a drink," etc. The number of friends one has when in a balloon is a revelation. One seems to have no enemies, and in fact to be beyond and above all the little trumpery trials of life, and to feel with Jackanapes' grandfather that "we needn't be so bitter after all."

At 12.15 we passed over High Wycombe, and shortly afterwards suspect we are falling as the air is becoming cooler. Our suspicions are confirmed by throwing a scrap of newspaper overboard. As it appears to

fly up we know we are falling, and that fast, so sprinkle out seven handfuls of sand as a sort of propitiatory offering to the demon of gravity below. At first no result; but touching 670 feet we find, again by a friendly scrap of paper, that we are rising. The aneroid now races round, and in ten minutes registers 2200 feet. As there is no object in going too high, and every reason for wishing to be able to see the country below, we give a tug at the valve-line, but continue to rise till the aneroid shows 2550 feet. Determined not be beaten we give several short tugs at the valve-line, and part with enough gas to cause us to drop to 1000 feet by 12.50; but the expansion of gas, caused by the sun having come out, is again too much for us, and as we pass over Leighton Buzzard, at 12.55, we notice we are once more steadily rising.

A little south of the town I get a second snap-shot with my Eclipse camera, but find afterwards that I have hardly selected wisely, as the result shows a very ordinary picture, hardly worth taking.

Another ten minutes and we are up again at 2450 feet, and now I get a shot at a very beautiful shadow of our balloon on the clouds below. The scene is fine in the extreme. Far as the eye can reach a vast billowy sea of snow-white cumulus clouds, absolutely glittering in the bright sunshine, the only relief the dark shadow of our balloon, relieved itself in its

turn by a curious silver halo.

Here and there we sail across a great rent in the clouds through which we see the neat English fields (a Canadian girl once asked me whether they weren't all dusted very early by a housemaid) shining bright green in the rays of brilliant sunshine. Still slightly rising, we sail at a rate of forty-one miles an hour, heading north by east. I may here pause to mention that the motion in a balloon running free is so perfect as to almost defy detection. Writing on one's knee is as easy as it would be in a drawing-room, and of draughts there are none.

At the moment that I am asking Captain Jones whether we are not becalmed, we are really going thirty-eight miles an hour, as

we tell by subsequent observations. At 1.10 we pass a church, about three miles south of Bedford, whose tower stands fifty yards from its west wall, and ten minutes later cross, at a height of 2850 feet, directly over Bedford, a town built on more or less mathematically correct lines. Again the box of bricks idea comes irresistibly to one's mind. It is now that Captain Jones shows the old soldier, or rather the old sailor, as he says we are easting too much, for unluckily the higher wind (in which we are) is S.S.W., and visions of having to eventually shorten our trip to prevent drifting into the Wash seem likely to be realised. Captain Jones had noticed however that the lower wind, some 1000 feet below, was south, with only a little west in it—a direction which promised far better for the prolongation of our trip. Accordingly we give the valve-line several short steady pulls, enough to counteract the bright sunshine, the warmth of which is expanding the gas and driving us ever upwards. This is at 1.25 p.m., when the aneroid reads nearly 3000 feet. Steadily we fall, and by 2 p.m. are only 300 feet from the ground, and as a large town is visible some three miles ahead we throw out a little ballast, but with niggardly hand.

At 2.10 we pass rather more than a mile east of Peterborough, at a height of only 900 feet, and the air being clear, have a splendid view—roads, railways, houses, gardens, all are laid out like a map—and further off, where the houses seem to jostle each other, we see well and clearly the famous cathedral. A scene like this must be seen from a balloon to be realised, the extraordinary distinctness of the details of the landscape, which glides so steadily from under one, being striking to a degree.

My fourth and last plate I dedicate to this view, and I think my reader will agree that the result is good. Nothing particular happens for the next hour, except that we run off our ordnance map, and are reduced to using a Bradshaw map, which is all too small for the purpose, and that we creep up again to over 2000 feet, down again to 1000, and up again to 2650 feet. A little before

three o'clock we pass two miles west of Boston. This is a great relief, as we had much feared passing over, or even east of it, which would have meant a speedy descent to avoid the sea. Seeing how well our drop into the lower current had answered our expectations, this would have been very disappointing.

The sun still brightly shining, continues to expand the gas, and makes us rise more rapidly than we wish, seeing that the matter of a final descent will soon be the all-absorbing question of the moment. At ten minutes past three we are at an elevation of 2600 feet, and the sea is now within reasonable distance, although not in sight, owing to the haze so common towards the end of a fine October day. A prolonged tug at



PETERBOROUGH, FROM THE EAST.

(Taken at a height of 900 feet, when balloon was going at thirty-eight miles an hour.)

the friendly valve-rope eases the strain of the expanding gas, and in ten minutes we drop some 2000 feet. It is exactly half past three when we pass a large town to our left, which from our Bradshaw map we take to be Louth. Inquiry from our numerous unknown friends below confirms this view, as it also confirms our suspicions that we have been, so to speak, "going the pace." In fact we have come from Boston, twenty-six miles off, in thirty-five minutes—a rate of forty-five miles an hour.

It is high time now to look out for a good place to land, and this is not difficult (although we happen to be again at nearly 2000 feet), as the country is very open, and rises gently to our front. Selecting a large ploughed field, and letting the grapnel run down the grapnel rope, we take our first

bump, and although still going nearly thirty miles an hour, feel but little shock, as we lift our feet off the bottom of the car, hanging for the moment by our arms to the ropes above, and so letting the car itself take the shock. With ever decreasing speed—thanks to the grapnel which is trailing along the plough, jumping and hopping the furrows, and tugging lustily at the balloon—we skim along and take a high hedge in first-class racing style. In this hedge the grapnel decides to stay, a decision which is communicated to us by a jerk, which leaves no doubt in our minds that we have run our course. For a minute or so the balloon resists, and then accepting its fate with a good grace, alights quietly enough on the ground.

For the moment one's temptation is to jump triumphantly out, but luckily one knows too well what it means to the "other fellow." The sudden loss of eleven stone would of course make the balloon rise with a rush, tear the grapnel out of the hedge, and the abandoned comrade would find himself in a very few minutes 10,000, 12,000, perhaps 20,000 feet up, and in this case, to make matters worse, well out to sea, with little or no chance of making land. The temptation however is not yielded to, and friendly help arrives in the shape of a farm labourer. At first he declines to touch the uncanny thing, but others coming up, we persuade them to hold the car down whilst one of us jumps out, drags down the top of the balloon, so that it lies on its side, unscrews the crown, and so lets the gas escape freely. Then we roll up the whole, neatly pack everything, except the metal crown of the gas valve, into the car, and, thanks to the friendly offices of Mr. Motley,

of Covenham, St. Bartholomew, start in a country cart for a seven miles drive into Louth, to catch the 5.20 for London.

The fare for so unexpectedly long a journey takes all our available cash, except a solitary florin, which we unluckily have to expend in a tip. It is now that the fact that we do not happen to have lunched intrudes itself on our minds, and as the train steams off we hold a council of war as to how best to victual ourselves. The next stop is at Boston, and here I dash out, and in a few pathetic words melt the station-master's heart, and get a small cheque cashed. All now is peace and content, and between 9 and 10 p.m. we steam into King's Cross, lodging the balloon in the cloak room, to the manifest astonishment of the usually imperturbable clerk. We leave the station with no other sign of our aerial trip than the metal crown of the balloon, which, being of rather delicate make, we prefer to carry. Probably not one in a thousand guesses what it is. So feeling like a belated plumber and his mate, we push on, thanking our stars that plumbers are not here, as in America, regarded as public enemies to be shot at sight. At least that is the conclusion I have always drawn from the tale of the American householder, who, hearing someone in his house at night, rushed to the top of the stairs with his six-shooter, but on hearing a scared voice say, "Don't shoot; I'm only a burglar!" rejoined, "Oh, I beg your pardon, I thought you were the plumber," and went back to bed and slept soundly. And this last was exactly what we did, sleeping none the less soundly for our free run of 152 miles in four hours and twenty minutes.

