

Jules Verne, the author of a score or more scientific novels, gives a fine picture in "The Clipper of the Clouds" of the air-ship of the future. It is not a balloon. He ridicules the ærostat. Guiding balloons he stigmatises as absurd. The 'pretentious skin-bags' are at the mercy of every current in the atmosphere. An air-ship to conquer must be a ship heavier than the air. The science of the near future will give us that. Aerial navigation is something more than a dream of the scientific. But a balloon? That is only a temporary substitute and not a good one. "What?" say the scornful hero of the story, "a balloon! When to obtain the raising of a couple of pounds you require a cubic yard of gas. A balloon, pretending to resist the wind by aid of its mechanism when the pressure of a light breeze on a vessel's sails is not less than that of 400 horse-power!" True enough. The air-ship of, let us trust, the early part of the next century will no more resemble the balloon of to-day than a White Star liner resembles the primeval raft upon which the first mariner put out to sea. But ballooning is not to be despised. For holiday purposes, if not the uses of commerce, it is delightful. Lieutenant G. P. Lempriere, of Handsworth, has made a study of æronautics for twenty years past, and is an enthusiastic believer in the future of aerial navigation. On the 30th of March—the day of the opening of the Victoria Park extension—I availed myself of the kindly offer of a seat in Lieutenant Lempriere's balloon, the "England's Glory." The only other passenger was Mr. Frank Price. Lieutenant Lempriere was busy for several hours on that memorable Wednesday preparing for the voyage in the air, and the silken bag, with its capacity to hold 30,000 cubic feet of gas, was gazed at with awe by a steadily growing crowd. A start was made about five o'clock, in the presence of a huge and excited populace. "Loose the car! let her go!" shouted the captain of the air-vessel with as much authority as ever was exercised by the centurion of old. There was a slight but by no means disagreeable sensation of moving as a score or so of sinewy hands were taken off the edge of the car, and we began our flight. Another second and the crowd appeared to be receding from us, the balloon remaining perfectly still. There was some little speculation among us anent the course the balloon would take, but we were not left long in doubt. The gas envelope floated gently over Holly Road, the London and North Western Railway, and Hockley Brook, affording us a magnificent view of the park, and a big slice of the parish. Streets, clusters of houses, open spaces, were mapped out before us in a bewilderment of detail. A few seconds, and we were gazing downwards at Summerfield Park—a little patch of green and brown in an ugly blur of red buildings. Another minute and we were poised at a good height above the Birmingham reservoir. The captain of our aerial barque pointed out to us the field from which he made a successful ascent two years or so ago, and, after an investigation of the ropes and what not, a consultation with his thermometer and aneroid, and some nice calculations which may or may not have been of mysterious import, "Would you like to go up above the clouds, gentlemen?" said he. Of course, Mr. Price and myself answered in the affirmative. Trust novices for seeing all there is to be seen. A bale of loose papers and a quantity of sand were pitched overboard. Earth slipped gradually out of sight, a glimpse of Quinton, Halesowen, and the fringe of the Black Country following on each other with the rapidity and beauty of cleverly manipulated dissolving views. We now had time to look about us and take in, as nearly as we could, the exact nature of our position. I was surprised to find that the throat of the balloon had been left wide open, but did not care to betray my ignorance. Surely, thought I, the captain must intend to come down and be letting out the gas! At the moment I could imagine no greater calamity. The interior of the gas envelope was quite open to view; we could see to the valve at the top of the balloon with ease, and the sunlight, streaming through the silken texture, transformed the gigantic ball of gas into a fairy cavern of more than Oriental beauty. The experiences of the next half hour were of a kind to linger long in the memory of one unaccustomed to aerial voyaging. Lieutenant Lempriere—the skipper, Mr. Price and I called him in recognition of his position as commander—assured us that the skylines were by no means so picturesque as usual. The day was not bright though, owing to the low pressure of the wind, eminently suited to unambitious ballooning. If there were thunder clouds about, he remarked, the scene would be grander by far. I was content to take him at his word and enjoyed none the less the prospect below. Far underneath, completely hiding terra firma from our vision, floated shoals of thin, fleecy clouds, whilst overhead a bluer sky than we had seen before that day seemed to beckon us to go higher yet. "How high are we?" said the skipper, in reply to a question. "Nearly 4,000 feet." Then leaning back at ease in the car and inviting us to join in the chorus, he sang into the balloon a snatch of "Mona" with its joyous tilt, "How swift goes my barque like a bird on the billow." There was method in this little variation. It relieved the appalling silence of the region of clouds, and afforded us an echo such as can be heard but seldom by mere earth-dwellers. Back came the words from the balloon, "How swift goes my barque," changed, but recognisable, and with a weird effect that must be experienced to be appreciated. A strange party we were. The skipper, who had been standing on the rim of the basket, with one hand resting on the ring to which the car was tied, stepped into the basket, to my intense relief, I confess, for his position seemed to me to partake of the reckless, and we passed away some twenty minutes in narrating our several experiences. The skipper's were naturally those best worth hearing. He told how, hanging to a parachute, he had fallen through 10,000 feet of air; how, when a boy, he made use of a carriage umbrella as a parachute, jumped from a high garden wall and barked his shins, and of exciting ballooning over land and water. Upon one occasion he made an ascent from Corfe, and was carried by a strong air current over every bend of the river to its outlet in the sea. He could not get out of that current do what he would, and his grapnel declined to have anything to say to the trees and patches of green at which he hurled it. Slipping off his boots and rolling up some canvas he made a water drag of the bundle and prepared himself for a rough time. Fortunately he righted himself more easily than he anticipated. At Little Island, a conveniently situated bit of earth, he threw the anchor once more, and it held. Fishermen came quickly on the scene, and he was towed in triumph to a place of safety. A cloud of snow interrupted the next story, and the skipper bade us prepare for a swift descent to the ground current we left below just after quitting Edgbaston. A fall of a few thousand feet in a few minutes is a mere nothing to your æronaut. To an onlooker the peril of the hazard would seem vast enough, no doubt, but the peculiarity and delight of air travelling is that earth and sky seem to move around the balloon. The balloon is a little system in itself and seated in the car, free from jolt or perceptible motion of any kind, travelling with the wind, and not feeling it, the æronaut is a man to be envied. The sight of the country beneath, after our rapid descent into the ground current, was anything but prepossessing. We were sailing over the Black Country, and the fires of a hundred blast furnaces were blazing away in ugly menace. The clang, clang of heavy machinery became distinctly audible, and, though interesting in its way, the sight and the sound seemed alike hideous after the calm serenity of the atmosphere we had just breathed. We passed rapidly over Dudley, and, perceiving fields—the country around looked for all the world like a huge patch-work quilt, covered with strange devices in the shape of trees, shrubs, and erections of brick and mortar—made as near a bee-line as a balloon can do for the greensward. The grapnel was thrown, but failed to hold in the newly-turned soil, and we made tracts for a lofty tree which reared itself up before us. "We are all right," said the skipper, and I devoutly hoped we were. It needs little reflection to understand that descending to the ground from the air is a more ticklish business than mounting aloft. The balloon was pulled up sharp, but without the slightest disaster to the car or its occupants, and the next moment half-a-dozen brawny villagers had hold of the rope, and we were drawn gently but firmly to the ground. The humorous part of the adventure was now to come. A broad-shouldered individual, whom the villagers addressed as "doctor," came up and demanded his "fee." He had driven fast across country for a mile and a half because someone had told him there was an accident, and he seemed quite disappointed there wasn't. Then up came a most indignant farmer, who in stentorian tones informed us that we were at Lower Gornal, and trespassing upon his domains. To deflate the balloon under such trying circumstances was no easy task, but all things come to an end. We reached Gornal about seven o'clock in the evening, after a voyage of just two hours; before all the hindrances to further progress had been removed it was nearly nine. Even then we only escaped after leaving with a mild-mannered policeman our names and addresses. A vehicle was procured and we drove slowly into Dudley. One train to Birmingham had just left, but there was another in an hour and a half! We whiled away the interval in telegraphing to our relatives and receiving the congratulations of sundry new-found friends. The belated train steamed in at last and we got back to Handsworth about midnight—tired, but with spirits unflagged. Mr. Price and I chartered a four-wheeler at Hockley Brook and drove home in a far less romantic manner than we sailed hence. Heigho! 'Twas ever thus. The happiest of afternoons cannot be indefinitely protracted. I complimented the gallant lieutenant on the courage and skill he had displayed aloft, and he, for his part, said he desired no more jovial passengers than Mr. Frank Price and