

The "COSMO" Balloon – August 13th 1888

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DESCENT OF A BALLOON NEAR BIRCHINGTON

INTERVIEW WITH MR SIMMONDS

The appearance of a balloon in the vicinity of Birchington and Westgate on Monday evening, created quite a sensation and as the "Cosmo" (for such it proved to be) was evidently making its descent, there was a stampede of bicycles, tricycles and flys¹ (sic.) and vehicles of every description, as well as a motley collection of pedestrians, who took the shortest cut to the neighbourhood of the strange visitor, which was brought to the earth a few yards from the little church at Acol. The Cosmo, which is the largest balloon in the world, left the Irish Exhibition (at Olympia) just before half-past five (pm), with Mr Simmonds and five passengers, with the intention of crossing the Channel to Vienna, or at any rate to Calais. As the balloon holds 62,000 cubic feet of gas, the work of inflation occupied about five hours and it took a hundred men just before starting to hold it down.

Mr Simmonds is a middle-aged, wtery (sic.) looking, iron-grey whiskered man wearing a frock coat and a wide-awake hat. His balloon is made of a white waterproof material and the car, which will seat nine passengers, is constructed of a strong iron mesh. The spot where the balloon came down is very near a number of small cottages, one of which had a narrow escape of having its roof destroyed by the drag-rope. The district is a rather out of the way one, but a few minutes after the descent there were no less than 500 persons present. Upon leaving the car, it was found that an aperture about 2 feet long had been made in the silk, probably by coming in contact with the trees.

Among the passengers was a young Parsee, who was in the Olympia at the time, and who decided to travel in the balloon upon very short notice, being compelled to purchase an overcoat in the grounds. The latter requisite was found to be highly necessary, for during the voyage the thermometer went down to as low as 28 degrees, or four degrees of frost. The gay young Indian appeared to enjoy his adventure immensely, and upon alighting gave an excellent exhibition of his knowledge of the English language to an admiring group of the fair sex. The aeronaut was most anxious about the Cosmo and would not consent to leave it until he had seen it safely tucked away at the Birchington Railway Station ready for transit the next day.

Subsequently he was taken to Margate by a Westgate gentleman, spent the night at the White Hart Hotel and travelled to Town on Tuesday morning with his balloon. In the course of an interview with the celebrated aeronaut, Mr Simmonds was asked if he considered ballooning a dangerous mode of travelling; he replied in the affirmative and stated that when going auon a voyage

¹ A light one-horse covered carriage, let out on hire.

he always considers whether he is taking his life in his hands. The voyage on Monday was described as a peculiarly dangerous one. In the course of further conversation, Mr Simmonds stated that he is paid £20 by the Directors of the exhibition for an ascent in their grounds; that each passenger pays £5 for their "fare" if landed in England and £25 if disembarked on the Continent.

During a period of thirty years he has made no less than 192 successful ascents, in one of which he was employed to lift Groof, the unfortunate Chelsea "flying man" from the Cremorne Gardens in 1872, in order that he might give a demonstration of his flying apparatus. He was picked up in a Butcher's area, (the semi-basement in front of the business) a corpse. Speaking of Professor Baldwin and his wonderful Parachute, Mr Simmonds remarked that he was certainly a plucky fellow, but he has afraid he would some day come to grief in alighting upon a church or a building of some kind; this he considered the chief source of Mr Baldwin's danger. The scene of his descent in a barley field belonging to Cleve Court, was, on Thursday, sketched for one of the London illustrated papers. Considerable damage has been done to the crop.

The *Standard* correspondent gives the following narrative of the voyage:

"The balloon, when released, rose rapidly and in three minutes had attained an altitude of twelve hundred feet. Soon after starting we were directly over South Kensington Exhibition and could see Octon's balloon in process of inflation. We hovered for a moment hoping to see her ascend and join us, but we were borne remorselessly along and reached the river (Thames) near Charing Cross. Five minutes later, we passed through a cloud and were soon at a height of 3,000 feet, exposed to the rays of a hot sun, which expanded the gas to the fullest capacity, causing an overflow of gas that troubled one of the passengers considerably. A heavy bank of cloud lay to the right. Here we got a pretty view of the Surrey Canal through rifts in the clouds, which shut the intervening portion of the earth from our sight.

We were now at 5,100 feet and the barking of a dog was distinctly heard. At 5,555 feet we were enveloped in cloud and heard the whistle of a train. At six (pm) we were nearing Tilbury Docks and discerned the shipping from our height of 6,000 feet; we had travelled about 25 miles in forty minutes. Extending around the horizon was a dense bank of clouds, which, illuminated by the sun, presented a picture of rare beauty. Mr Simmonds, climbing into the concentrating ring, loosened the valve cord, which had become entangled. We were now over the Docks and Mr Simmonds, remarking we looked like a bouquet of flowers, called attention to the P & O steamers, looking like toy boats beneath us.

The view was beautifully clear below and except for patches of clouds, which floated lazily below us, we got a magnificent prospect of the earth lying like a shallow basin at our feet. The Medway came into sight at 6.10 and was beneath us ten minutes after. A heavy bank of clouds was rising from the east and at 6.25, when in the bank of clouds we saw the shadow of the balloon with the rainbow halo around it. So clear was the air that I could distinctly see the wake

of the steamboat in the river, 6,000 feet below. We ascended to 6,200 feet and floated above the bank of clouds, which hung over Chatham. We were now too high to discern human beings and the Medway forts appeared deserted.

For the first time the balloon began to rotate and the sun, which had been until now behind us, was full ahead. We again saw the reflection of the balloon on the clouds, but this time the car was also visible and the passengers amused themselves by making signals to our double, which promptly answered. At 6.35 a vast extent of clouds completely shut out the earth and our view was confined to the bright blue sky above and the white fleecy clouds beneath. The sun was now a globe of silver, the dense clouds almost shutting him from us at the height of 6,700 feet. But the masses of vapour rolled away in five minutes and then we got our first glimpse of the sea. To the south were green fields interspersed with patches of brown, which denoted the ripening grain. To the north-west was Faversham, while behind were Sheerness and Queenborough.

Mr Simmonds enquired if it was our wish to cross the Channel and received an affirmative reply from all but one of our little band of passengers. The crescent of the new moon shone upon us brightly. Having descended to 4,500 feet, we could see on the ground an elongated shadow of the balloon. Our altitude was only maintained by the loss of large quantities of ballast. Mr Simmonds said if any passengers would alight, he would approach within two or three feet of the earth and drop them safely. Two of the number agreed to this and the prospects of a Channel trip were brighter for the rest. In dropping, however, we got into a current, which bore us rapidly to the North towards the sea, rendering further descent impracticable. We were then at an altitude of 2,150 feet. Herne Bay was now ahead. We ascended to 4,450 feet and drifted slowly back towards the land, the balloon rotating considerably.

We threw out a bag of ballast and at 7.10 (pm) regained our altitude of 6,000 feet; but the current of wind had greatly diminished in force and was very variable. The Channel was now in view and as in five minutes, at a height of 7,800 feet, we found the same perversity of currents, Mr Simmonds decided to come down. The valve was opened for the first time and we rapidly approached the earth. We came down in a field, but the grapnel failed to hold and we rushed on, the car striking a rail fence and tearing down one of its sections. We threw out a small quantity of ballast and rose to the topmost branches of a tree, which bent beneath our weight. By this time several persons had reached us and we were literally hauled down, leaving our grapnel in the branches of another tree. We eventually landed in safety in a wheat field belonging to Mr Goodson, between Westgate and Birchington and four miles from Margate.²

² The actual site of their landing was in the field just behind St Mildred's Church, Plumstone Rd. in Acol, which lies about a mile due south of Birchington.