

## DIRIGIBLE FAILURES AND SUCCESSES.

DIRIGIBLE balloons have been in the air, both literally and figuratively, in the course of the past few weeks, and from the successes and failures they have achieved there are quite a number of valuable lessons to be deduced. At last this country has been given an opportunity of seeing a first-class dirigible—one which is capable of better things than the elementary pottering which has hitherto been the most salient characteristic of British aerial navigation by dirigible. The "Clement-Bayard" was certainly long overdue; in fact there is more than a touch of comedy about the whole thing. First of all there was the announcement that she was positively coming within a matter of days—all that was required was suitable housing accommodation; and forthwith up went the huge erection on Wormwood Scrubbs, men working feverishly day and night until it was finished. Then, month after month, the public heard at intervals that "The Clement airship, which was to inhabit the *Daily Mail* garage at Wormwood Scrubbs" was to be ready for trial flights, and, luck and the elements being propitious, she would really and truly make the crossing this time. Time after time things happened—in fact, everything happened but the crossing—until everyone had begun to despair of ever seeing the airship which had assumed so very nebulous an appearance. Then, one fine Sunday morning when good people were wending their way home from church and the wicked were away playing golf or week-ending at Brighton, down dropped the Clement at the doors of the garage. It was well done—done in a business-like way and done quite dramatically. It happened to be a fine morning at Compiègne. "Clement-Bayard II" was brought out for trial; everything seemed to be going nicely and everything happened to be ready, so "We will go to London," said M. Clement; and to London they came.

We cannot help regarding it as just a little bit unfortunate that this historic flight—for it is historic in that it marks the first crossing of the Channel by a dirigible, if we except poor "La Patrie" which came across "on its own" so to say—has taken place at a time when the heavier-than-air machine has no recent outstanding performance in this country to point to that will help the public mind to preserve a proper sense of proportion. The man in the street is almost absolutely a creature of the moment, and there is a danger that, in contrasting the beautifully easy manner in which the Paris-London journey was made by the "Clement-Bayard" with Moisant's twenty-one day flight between the two capitals, there may be a disposition in the public mind to consider the dirigible proved and the aeroplane damned. We hold no brief for the aeroplane against the dirigible or *vice versa*, but what we do say is that neither cross-Channel journey has proved more than the other. The fact that the "Clement-Bayard" made the journey with the speed and certainty of an express train proves that given everything in its favour the dirigible can make the trip between Paris and London in about seven hours; but we are still without information as to what it can do the journey in against a twenty-mile wind—even if it could ascend at all. Moisant's trip proved that it was possible for an aviator to encounter such bad fortune that when boisterous weather and mechanical trouble it was possible to take three weeks over the trip that the airship accomplished in twice as many hours. In fine, neither is a convincing demonstration of the true possibilities of either form of craft, and

it would be well to suspend judgment until more is known about these things.

Coming to the unsuccessful attempt of Wellman to cross the Atlantic, here again the real lessons to be deduced are almost purely negative. He failed in what he had set out to do, and he failed for very obvious reasons. But that by itself does not of necessity prove that it is impossible to cross the Atlantic by dirigible. Do not let us be misunderstood in this. We do not say that it is easy or even possible in the light of present day achievement to make the journey—our point simply is that the possibility has been neither proved nor disproved. Wellman made his attempt with an ancient gas-bag that, since his abortive Polar attempts, must almost have become a white elephant on his hands. Utterly unsuited for such a journey, nothing but failure was to have been anticipated from his attempt, and yet, supposing for a moment that he had struck a series of strong westerly winds, such as often prevail at this time of the year, and he had achieved his crossing, still nothing would have been proved but the fact that given everything in its favour the dirigible can travel great distances. So can the spherical balloon. However, it is by no means our intention to belittle anything that has been done—what we want to point out is that there is yet much to be done; and it is unsafe to assume that too much has been demonstrated.

Now, a word as to dirigible prospects in England. It seems to have been more or less definitely settled that the Clement vessel is to be acquired for the use of the Army. Some little objection has been raised in certain quarters against a supposed decision to do without some of the minor tests which were laid down as necessary before an air-craft could be accepted for Service use. To our mind, the military authorities would be quite right in dispensing with any such relatively unimportant tests. In the first place, the Clement is not a mere experiment. She has proved herself over and over again, and as for her suitability for military use up to the point that is at present feasible, we need only point to her work in the course of the late French manoeuvres. In any case, it is really time that the British Army had a thoroughly good start in the way of practical airships with which to conduct instructional work. The parsimonious footing that has simply resulted in the painful little craft which the military balloonists have been compelled to try to fit into their needs may look well in the Army Estimates, but reduced to a factor of every-day common-sense it is disastrous. By all means let the country secure the Clement and as many more craft of the kind as are needful to train officers and men against the day when they may be wanted badly.

Turning to other ships in prospect, the Lebaudy, which is to be purchased out of the *Morning Post* fund, appears to have done very well in France, and just as we go to press, has arrived at Aldershot. Then there is the modified Zeppelin, under construction at Barrow and approaching readiness for her trials. This latter is of course an Admiralty craft, designed entirely for experimental work in connection with what we may call a potential "blue-water" air fleet. By the time this and the Lebaudy pass into commission, there will at least be the nucleus of an aerial navy that will put Great Britain in a position to start taking her rightful place in military aviation, even if she cannot yet boast the mistress-ship or controlling fleet of the air.