

HOW I HANDCUFFED HOUDINI.

LONDON HIPPODROME MATCH. A PRESS AGENT'S CHALLENGE.

Will. A. Bennet, press representative, Moss Empires, London and the London Hippodrome, recently told in "Pearson's Weekly" of a match he made at the Hippodrome with Houdini the Handcuff King, now appearing at the Tivoli Theatre, Sydney.

In March, 1904, having found my way from my native Scotland to Fleet-street, via the provincial Press. I was working for a London daily (Will. Bennet wrote). One morning I suggested to the editor that it would be a good "gag" or "scoop" if we could put a pair of handcuffs on Houdini, the Handcuff King, that he could not open—Houdini was performing at the London Hippodrome, and daily challenging all-comers to beat him.

The editor agreed in much the same way as he might have done had I suggested that it would be a good "gag" if I could get His Majesty King Edward VII., to give me an interview on his life as a monarch.

For truly the task of handcuffing Houdini seemed the forlornist of hopes—hundreds of experts had tried it and failed, and I had nothing "up my sleeve" in the way of an invincible handcuff.

However, I was given permission to have a shot at the seemingly impossible, and a few hours later I arrived at Birmingham, where, if anywhere, I reckoned I should find the handcuffs capable of holding Houdini. I consulted a directory, made some inquiries, hired a cab, and set out on a round of the principal locksmiths of Birmingham.

A SEARCH FOR HANDCUFFS.

If I called on one, I must have called on a hundred, but without receiving the least encouragement, none cared to try a fall with the "Handcuff King." Hours sped by in this unavailing search, and I was beginning to despair, when luckily, as it proved, my cabman turned rusty and refused to drive me about any longer.

Naturally, I was not in the best of tempers by this time, and cabby's insolence was the last straw. I got out of the cab the more freely to express my opinion of him, and my remarks delivered by no means sotto voce, attracted the attention of a policeman, who came up to see what was the matter.

Cabby and I explained simultaneously—I in-

sisting on my right to his cab so long as I required it, he demanding to see the color of my money.

"I suppose you can pay him, sir?" said the constable. For answer I pulled out a handful of gold and silver, the paper having equipped me liberally with the "sinews of war."

"That's all right, sir," said the policeman, ordering cabby to resume his post. "No," I said, "I have had enough of him. What is his legal fare?" and forthwith I paid the cabby his legal dues, and sent him off.

Then it struck me that if anyone was likely to be "up" in handcuffs a policeman was, so I explained my predicament to the now friendly constable, and invoked his assistance. My luck was in.

"Well, sir," said he, "It's a funny thing you should have hit upon me, for I believe I know the very man you want."

There was some difficulty about his leaving his beat, but "bribery and corruption" prevailed, and he led me through a maze of mean streets to a small locksmith's shop, telling me meanwhile that the man to whom he was taking me made a speciality of handcuffs, and had spent five years in perfecting an "unbreakable" pair.

Our man was in, and actually working on the very handcuffs. I explained that I had heard of his invention, and, as a newspaper man, had come from London to see it. Mr. Nathaniel Hart, for such was his name, was an artist, and, with all an artist's pride in the favorite child of his brain, he showed me the handcuffs and explained their mechanism, telling me that no man in the world could get out of them once they were on his wrists.

FIVE YEARS IN THE MAKING.

The mechanism was too complicated for me to follow—no wonder, considering it had taken five years to perfect—but I understood enough to know that if there was a pair of handcuffs in the world capable of holding Houdini, I had them in my grasp.

"How much will you take for them?" said I.

"No, no, sir," said Mr. Hart, starting back, "they are not for sale. I wouldn't sell them for their weight in gold twice over."

This was rather awkward. "Well, then," said I, "will you lend them to me? I'll pay you well for the loan of them for a fortnight," and went on to tell him the exact nature of my errand, and, to cut the story short, an hour later I was whirling back to London with the precious handcuffs in my pocket.

Next evening Houdini duly stepped into the ring and invited the audience to test him with their own handcuffs.

More than a little nervous, I entered the arena, and presented my handcuffs to Houdini. Almost instantly I knew that my paper was, at all events, going to have a run for its money. For Houdini, after gazing at the handcuffs for a moment, handed them back to me, saying,

"No, I will not put them on. 'Why not?' I asked. 'They are not regulation pattern. I will have nothing to do with them,' he answered, and some time moving off to another part

will have nothing to do with them," he answered, at the same time moving off to another part of the ring.

I followed him, protesting, and the audience, seeing there was something amiss, began to shout and boo.

"Stop the music," I said to Mr. Frank Parker. "I am going to have this out with Houdini." The music stopped, and, stepping forward, I delivered the following oration:—

"Ladies and Gentlemen,—On behalf of my paper I have just challenged Mr. Houdini to permit me to fasten these handcuffs on his wrist. Mr. Houdini declines (uproar).

UPROAR BY THE AUDIENCE.

"In the course of my journalistic duties this week I interviewed a locksmith at Birmingham, who has spent five years of his life perfecting a lock, which he alleges no mortal man can pick.

"The handcuffs I wish to fasten upon Mr. Houdini contain such a lock. It is made of finest British steel by a British workman, and has been paid for with British gold. (Cheers.) It is all British, in fact. (Cheers.)

"I think I am right in saying Mr. Houdini is an American. (Cheers and counter cheers). Americans are fond of saying they have nothing to fear from anything British. (Uproar). Mr. Houdini is evidently afraid of British-made handcuffs, for he will not put on this pair. (Great disturbance, during which Mr. Frank Parker vainly implored me to get out before there was a riot)."

Very grim of face, Houdini stuck to his point that his challenge applied to regulation police handcuffs only, and at once started his performance, quickly freeing himself from the three pairs of handcuffs which had been placed on his wrists.

It looked as if I should have had to retire, for the audience were not in a mood to stand any further interruption, and Houdini was within his rights.

But my Birmingham locksmith had taught me a thing or two, and at the imminent risk of being "chucked out" by the Hippodrome six-footers, I started another interruption.

Stepping forward, I asked Houdini to handcuff me with one of the pairs he had just got rid of. This he unwillingly did. I walked over to the area steps, gave the cuffs a sharp rap on the wood, and they fell apart.

More uproar; but now the audience were in my favor, and Houdini looked upset. Again I challenged him, and again he refused. "Go it, gov'nor," shouted someone, and I went at it, taunting Houdini with no longer having any right to the title of "Handcuff King."

"Make a match of it," yelled someone, and the suggestion took. Fairly cornered, Houdini agreed to a match at a matinee the following week, and amidst a storm of cheers and counter cheers I left the ring, to the great and forcibly expressed relief of the Hippodrome management.

Never shall I forget the afternoon of March 17th, 1904, when the encounter took place.

You may be sure neither the Hippodrome nor

You may be sure neither the Hippodrome nor my paper had forgotten to "bang the big drum"

and the Hippodrome was packed even to its uttermost limits.

SYMPATHY ALL WITH HOUDINI.

Popular sympathy was all with Houdini, who received a tremendous ovation when he stepped into the ring. A second or two later I had locked the handcuffs on Houdini's wrists, and, after a little speech, in which he tactfully won the audience still further to his side by saying, "I am now locked up in a handcuff that has taken a British mechanic five years to make. I do not know whether I am going to get out of it or not, but I can assure you I am going to do my best." Houdini disappeared into his "ghost-house," as he called the little tent in which he worked his wonders, at 3.15 p.m. precisely.

If I ever felt "bad" in my life, it was then. The reputation of my paper, to say nothing of my own, was at stake, and we had little more than the word of an unknown locksmith to stand on.

Certainly, I had the greatest faith in Mr. Hart—but still Houdini was—Houdini.

I should have been woefully disappointed, but I do not think I should have been greatly surprised had Houdini emerged from his ghost-house at 3.16 with the handcuffs held aloft. But 3.16, 3.20, 3.25, 3.30, 3.35 passed, and there was no sign from the little tent.

My breath began to come more easily, and then suddenly my heart seemed to stop beating. For at 3.37 Houdini put his head out of the ghost-house, and the audience broke into round after round of cheering. We were beaten, I thought, and rather badly beaten. But Houdini was still manacled. He merely wished to examine his fetters under the electric light.

Again he disappeared, again to emerge at 35 minutes from the start—still fettered, and now showing signs of defeat in his crumpled collar and streaming face.

"My knees hurt. But I am not done yet," he gasped to the audience. "Give him a cushion," said I, and this concession brought me into favor with the audience.

For 20 minutes more the band played on, and then Houdini was seen to emerge once more from the cabinet. Still handcuffed. Almost a moan burst from the vast assemblage as this was noticed.

LOOKED LIKE A FREE FIGHT.

He looked terribly exhausted, as he came towards me. "Will you remove the handcuffs for a moment," he said, "in order that I may take off my coat?"

I think I may claim then to have done a plucky thing, for I refused. A perfect howl of execration burst from the audience, and it really looked as if the proceedings would end in a free fight, so intense and bitter were the feelings of my action aroused.

Mr. Parker and the other officials began to look anxious, for, as I say, there was every promise of a "Donnybrook." It is seldom, however, if ever, that one appeals in vain to the

It is seldom, however, if ever, that one appeals in vain to the British public's sense of fair play. I stepped forward, and held up my hand for a hearing, which was granted:

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "I only ask for fair play between Mr. Houdini and myself. I do not wish to take any unfair advantage of him, but in justice to my paper I must see that he takes no unfair advantage of me. Mr. Houdini has seen me lock the handcuffs; if he were now to see me unlock them, he would have a valuable clue to the secret of their mechanism. I respectfully submit that Mr. Houdini's request is unreasonable, and for that reason I decline to grant it."

More uproar; but, on the whole, the audience saw the justice of my point.

Houdini, however, was far from done with. He managed to get a penknife out of his pocket, opened it with his teeth, and then, turning his coat inside out over his head, still holding the knife in his mouth, proceeded to cut and hack at the garment, until at last he was free of it—amidst, I need hardly say, tumultuous applause from the audience.

Back into the cabinet he went, and before long someone announced that an hour had elapsed since the start.

I must say, I now thought I had Houdini beaten, but ten minutes later I was sadly undeceived. For just as the band were finishing a stirring march Houdini bounded from the ghost-house with a great shout of victory and holding the shining handcuffs aloft in his hand. And then was Bedlam loosed.

Never before or since have I heard such cheering. Houdini himself was quite overcome, and sobbed like a child as he was carried shoulder-high around the arena.

As for myself—well, of course, I was disappointed. But, at the same time, I felt that, although beaten, I was in no way disgraced. Apart from that, any little mortification I may have felt was quickly swallowed up in admiration of Houdini's wonderful achievement, which my paper suitably recognised by presenting him with a beautiful silver model of the handcuffs, which, as he told me afterwards, had given him the worst hour and ten minutes of his life.

THE SECRET.

I am glad to add that, inimical though the audience was to me at times, Houdini recognised that I had acted fairly, sending the following telegram to my editor:

"Allow me to thank you for the open and upright manner in which your representative treated me in to-day's contest. Must say that it was at once the hardest, but, at the same time, one of the fairest tests I ever had."

(Signed) Harry Houdini.

And so everything ended happily, except, perhaps, for my locksmith, who was broken-hearted when he first heard the news. But, at all events, he had the satisfaction of knowing that he had done more than any other of his craft had even been able to accomplish; and, further, although I must not betray trade secrets, that it was only a peculiar physical defect that enabled Houdini to defeat his beautiful mechanism.

mechanism.

I became a constant visitor to the Hippodrome, made friends with the staff, was admitted "behind the scenes," worked many more "gags" in connection with turns there for the Press, and, having been told that I had some talent for showmanship, when Mr. Stoll began the building of the Coliseum, I applied for the post of Press agent, and obtained it."