

## THE BIRD MAN.

### LEARNING TO FLY.

#### HOUDINI'S LATEST FEAT.

Early morning visitors to the Rosehill race-course yesterday were treated to an unusual sight—that of a man flying. The intrepid aviator was Houdini, known the world over as the "Handcuff King." Not content with having achieved notoriety sufficient for at least a dozen men, he desires to be even better known as the first aviator to make successful flights in Australia, and, judging by yesterday's performance, he bids fair to achieve his desire.

The morning frost was still white upon the ground when the huge bi-plane slowly emerged from its shed, propelled by the stout arms of the chief mechanic and his staff of assistants. The morning was an ideal one for flying, not a breath of air was stirring, and with everything seeming so favourable for the making of a successful flight the hopes of the little knot of spectators, who had gathered seemingly from nowhere round the machine, rose high in anticipation. Nor were they doomed to disappointment.

Houdini himself seemed the least perturbed of the party. Coolly smoking a cigarette, he watched the preparations with a critical though quite unmoved eye. That he was taking an interest in the proceedings could be observed from the quiet yet incisive manner in which he ordered minor defects to be remedied.

At last all was ready, the machine was drawn into position, facing a long prepared run of about a quarter of a mile. The chief assistant was busily engaged with spanner and oilcan, when Houdini, mounting the machine, took his seat behind the driving wheel. Very carefully he moved the front planes, now up, now down. One trial was not sufficient. They had to be tested many times before he was satisfied that they were in first-class working order. Next the rudder, a peculiar horizontal piece of canvas, stiffened with wooden supports and enclosed in the tail plane, had to be tested. It, too, proved to be in first-rate working condition.

"Surely he will fly now." This from the crowd who seemed consumed with impatience to see the daring aviator set out on his journey. But, no! The preparations were not complete. One must not, it seems, enter upon the business of flying lightly and without taking due precautions. There are details, insignificant though they seem to the person who will remain on terra firma, which demand the strictest attention.

Carefully grasping the wide lipped blade of the propeller in both hands, the mechanic started the engine—what a noise it made! So powerful is the propeller that the fumes from the exhaust becoming drawn into the vacuum formed behind the engine trail behind it like a greyish blue shawl of the finest texture. The pull of the engine being duly registered and found satisfactory, it was next decided to run the machine a couple of times up and down the prepared track to see that all was right before starting on the actual business of the day.

When released, the bi-plane looked like a gigantic white bird skimming gracefully over the surface of the earth. She scarcely touched the ground, and went at a tremendous pace. Another turn up the straight, and then everything was ready for the flight.

The attendants group themselves around the tail plane, to hold the machine down when the machine starts, a deep-toned throbbing, which deepens into a throaty roar as the engine gathers power, proclaims the fact that in a few moments more the intrepid Houdini

gathers power, proclaims the fact that in a few moments more the intrepid Houdini will set out on his journey. With feet firmly pressed against the ground the attendants keep the machine steady whilst the engine gathers power. As the revolutions of the propeller increase she quivers like a thing of life, her taut wires sing. A short word of command and the restraining hands are loosened. Houdini is off. Swiftly the machine speeds up the prepared track, and when nearing the end rises a few inches from the ground. Steadily, gracefully, and almost imperceptibly she rises higher and still higher. Suddenly a sickening lurch to the left brings a muttered exclamation from the lips of the excitable French mechanic. Shaking herself like a live thing, the bi-plane slowly rights herself, but commences to descend. After having traversed a couple of hundred yards in the air she touches the earth once more. For the first time in New South Wales a man has succeeded in flying.

The bi-plane is dragged back to the starting point once more, and the same preparations are again gone through. This time the machine seems to run on the ground rather than over it, and when the end of the course is reached she refuses to rise. The mechanic is mystified. Querulously he asks questions rapidly, and in a foreign tongue. He can't understand it at all. Everything was all right, and yet the machine refused to fly. With many expressive gestures he asks the reason why, but no satisfactory elucidation is put forward, although the theories advanced by the spectators, who have now gathered in larger numbers, are both many and ingenious—a trifle too ingenious it seems in some cases.

Nothing daunted by his ill-success on the previous attempt, Houdini prepares for another trial. This time the machine is held down longer than on either of the previous occasions. When released she progresses in a series of small jumps, almost like a stone skimming the surface of a pond. Some distance before the end of the straight is reached she finally leaves the earth and starts on her aerial journey. A short turn to the right and another to the left, and the turn has been successfully negotiated. The machine inclines violently to the left, rights herself, and then almost immediately lurches towards the left once more, and commences to descend. She comes down quickly with a rush, hitting the ground with the left hand portion of the front plane. The impact was so severe that Houdini was thrown from his seat, landing on his hands and knees some distance from his disabled machine. Springing up his first care was for his machine. Quickly he runs to it and shuts off the engine. A hasty examination shows that it has sustained very little damage, but further flying is out of the question for the day.

On the last occasion Houdini was in the air for some four or five minutes, and must have covered close upon half a mile. He will make another attempt to-day.

#### THE MACHINE.

The machine used by Houdini in his attempt of Monday is a Voisin bi-plane, and as its name implies consists of two planes, a larger and a smaller, the larger being set in front of the smaller. The larger plane, which is shaped like a box kite, is 30ft long, 5ft broad, and 6ft high. It is on wheels, which are attached to a spider-like framework underneath the seat of the driver. With the wheels touching the ground the top of the plane is about 12ft above the ground. The smaller plane in which the rudder works is box-shaped, and about 5ft square. The length of the machine from the small front elevating planes, of which there are two, to the end of the tail is exactly the same as the width of the front plane. The machine is fitted with an 80-horse power motor, which weighs 340lb, and drives an 8ft double-bladed propeller at the rate of 1200 revolutions per minute.

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#### HOW HOUDINI LEARNT TO FLY.

Seen after his flight, Houdini stated that some 18 months ago, when at Hamburg, he saw a Mons. Picquet, a French aviator, make an ascent. He was struck with the sport, and made up his mind to go in for it purely as a hobby. He decided to procure the machine used by Mons. Picquet, and notwithstanding the fact that on one occasion it caught fire whilst in the air he bought it, and after having it repaired started out to learn how to fly.

"Of course, I am only a fledgling yet, you know; but I hope some time soon to be an expert at the art. If you keep at the game long enough and do not get killed in the process you acquire the bird sense somewhat, feeling dangers instinctively rather than seeing them—at least, so I have been told—this last in parentheses."

Houdini went on to say that there is only one right way to fly, and that is to go up and come down without breaking the machine. "One can come down in such a variety of ways," he added smilingly, "and some of them are not greatly conducive to bodily comfort. When I came to Australia I decided that I would be the first man to make successful flights in the country, and so far I have managed fairly well. Of course, I only regard flying as a pastime. Still, it's a very good pastime, and one which brings a man a certain amount of honour, and after all honour satisfies the soul. Any way, I mean to keep at aviation till I become really proficient."

"And what then?" he was asked.

"Still keep on at it," was the rejoinder.