

My First Flight

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As our General Secretary, the Rev. Harold Morton, found it impossible to complete the northern part of his tour, and therefore postponed his visit to Queensland for a month or two, I went up to Brisbane a few weeks ago to do some of the Church and Masonic work which he would have done, and so to minimize the disappointment of our members in this district. While staying at Mr. Tweedie's ever hospitable home, I received an invitation to go over to Toowoomba and hold a couple of meetings there; and as I found that there was a daily service by aeroplane between the two towns, it occurred to me that the quickest and easiest method of transit would be to avail myself of that route.

This was all the more interesting to me because I had never been up in an aeroplane before, though in my younger days I made many balloon ascents. But of course the whole movement and method of progression of an aeroplane is utterly different from that of a balloon, so I felt that it would be an entirely new experience for me. I also felt that it would be of interest to observe the sylphs or spirits of the upper air, so it seemed desirable to take the opportunity which offered itself.

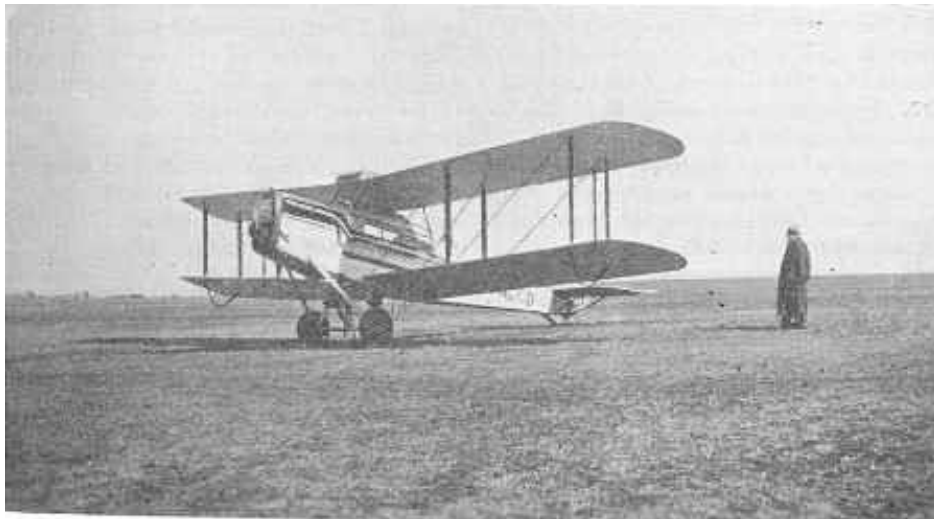


Dick Clarke and Bishop Leadbeater

Perhaps I should premise that although I had frequently been up in the Blue Mountains to a height probably as great as an aeroplane would be likely to touch during an ordinary trip in fine weather, that is by no means the same thing for observational purposes as actually leaving the surface of the earth. One is likely to meet varieties of fairies and nature-spirits in the Mountains which are not so common on lower ground; but they are still of the kind which dwells on the earth's surface and works with the trees and the flowers; whereas when one rises clear away from the touch of the soil, one finds oneself floating among spirits of the air which very rarely descend to the earth at all. In my earlier experiences

of ballooning I had not yet acquired clairvoyance, and so though I had risen on some of those occasions to much greater heights (though not more than about 2 ½ miles) I had no physical contact with the air creatures in their own realm. Of course in astral work one constantly ascends among them, but to go there in the physical vehicle is quite a different matter.

The aeroplane proved much more comfortable than I had thought to be possible. I had expected to have to don some horrible leather headpiece, more or less of the nature of a diver's helmet, and I also thought it probable that I should be very unpleasantly affected by the appalling noise of the engine. To my satisfaction I found that the machine awaiting us possessed a saloon, very much like the interior of a four-seated motor-car, except that the cushions were far softer than those of an automobile and that we had much more leg-room than a car usually provides. One had to climb into this saloon through a section of its roof, which opened something as does the bonnet of a motor-car, and that was a mild acrobatic feat; but the pilot told me that very shortly they would have new planes on that run with doors opening at the side just like those of an ordinary carriage. Anyhow, when once one was inside, it was exceedingly comfortable. Our machine, I may mention, was a bi-plane with a 240 horse-power engine.



Bishop Leadbeater and aeroplane

After the preliminary run on the ground which is necessary to get up speed the plane soared into the air just as a bird might have done, and I was delighted to find that in its cabin, even with the windows open, the roar of the engine was not sufficiently audible to be unpleasant, and we could converse with only a slight raising of the voice. I was much impressed by the steadiness with which it flew; it is the only kind of vehicle I have yet encountered (except a great mail-steamer) in which it is easy and comfortable to write with a pen. It sped through the air like an arrow, and for the greater part of the journey the sensation, so far as the physical nerves are concerned, was just as though it was resting on the earth. Two or three times in our seventy miles it seemed suddenly to drop about a foot with an odd little jerk, but we met with nothing in the nature of an air-pocket. Just after starting and just before alighting the plane swept round in a semicircle with a splendid swoop like an albatross, heeling over at a slight angle like a yacht in a breeze; otherwise it was as one-idea'd as an express train, holding its nose as straight as if it were pointed at a star.

The air spirits seemed to hail us with riotous joy; they clustered around us and circled at our prow just as I have often seen dolphins behave round the bows of a steamer. We were flying at a very fair speed, but these creatures circled round us with the utmost ease, as though they did not feel the air pressure at all. They gave me the impression of being extremely friendly and well-disposed, and did not in the slightest degree resent our intrusion upon their domain. Curiously enough, however, I caught sight of some other creatures higher up—much higher up—who seemed by no means so friendly. They were of immense size and looked somehow for more material than the sylphs. They were curiously sullen in appearance, and I rather wondered what sort of reception they would have given us if we had risen into their immediate neighbourhood. I did not much like the look of them; they reminded me uncomfortably of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's powerful story 'The Horror of the Heights.' But after all they may have been quite harmless, though sulky.

The alighting of the aeroplane at the end of the journey was a masterly achievement; we did not know when it touched the ground until we felt the comparative bumpiness of running over a field of grass. We had an equally pleasant experience when we flew back the next day, doing our seventy miles in just three-quarters of an hour. The whole thing is absolutely different from the aeronautics of my youth. The aeroplane seems to be absolutely under control, whereas in the balloon we were entirely at the mercy of the wind, our only power of voluntary motion being either to rise by throwing ballast overboard, or to sink by letting out some gas.

The balloon was wonderfully quiet and steady even in a fairly strong wind, because it moved absolutely with it, without the slightest resistance; but the descent was always something of an adventure. We endeavoured to find a reasonably smooth place for landing and then threw out a grappling hook at the end of a rope, which sometimes caught in a fence, a tree or a furrow, and sometimes declined to do so. When it did catch, the balloon swept down rather swiftly, but was always liable to rebound on touching the earth. In calm weather one could wind in the rope and throw other thinner lines to attendant yokels; but in gusty weather matters were much less certain, and the proceedings were liable to be protracted and sometimes painful. The machine heavier than air is in many ways a distinct improvement, and I shall watch its future development with great interest.