

ARTICLES



Arthur Ford (1896-1971)

American medium and founder of the International General Assembly of Spiritualists. Around 1921 Ford emerged as a trance medium, and "Fletcher," his control for the rest of his life, made his first appearance in trance sessions. Arthur Conan Doyle, who attended one of Ford's lectures in Britain, said "One of the most amazing things I have ever seen in 41 years of psychic experience was the demonstration of Arthur Ford." Despite an affliction for alcohol and morphine he impressed numerous people with his abilities, including prominent researchers William McDougall and William G. Roll, Jr. of the Psychical Research Foundation. He also traveled widely to demonstrate his mediumship and in Britain visited the Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies. In 1955 Ford was active in the formation of a similar organization in the United States, the Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship, now the Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship.

How I Broke Houdini's Code

(originally titled "A Round with the Magicians". All sub-headings were added by the webmaster of this website)

- Arthur Ford -

ONE OF the most passionate exposers of mediums was Houdini, the magician. In the early twenties he threw the entire weight of his reputation as a magician behind his declaration that all mediums were fakes, and that he could duplicate any trick a medium could do.

Although he later played a significant part in providing me with status as a medium, I never met Houdini. He died in 1926 and at that time I was much too inconspicuous to attract his attention. The influence of Houdini upon the whole Spiritualist Movement cannot be understood without some comprehension of the distinction which was Houdini's.

Houdini the Magician and Anti-Spiritualist

Here was a man who could break out of handcuffs of every invention and contrivance in any part of the world. He could beat the Fiji coin divers at their own game. He staged underwater stunts that astounded the medical profession by the length of time he could hold his breath. He broke out of packing cases built on-stage by local carpenters. Before astonished audiences he caused an elephant (not a rabbit) to disappear and he walked through a brick wall. He was exactly what he called himself, the master magician of his day.

In the early twenties Houdini turned his fabulous tenacity to exposing the whole Spiritualist Movement. There were probably then about a million people in the country who called themselves Spiritualists. In these days when university research in the field of parapsychology has made psychic interests respectable, when extrasensory perception is seriously considered in psychology courses, when the physical scientists are far less dogmatic about the non-physical world than was formerly the case, it is difficult to recover the violent reaction of the orthodox against Spiritualism in Houdini's day. In the orthodox mind all Spiritualists were equated with the lunatic fringe and all mediums were tools of the devil, even if there were no devil. Here Houdini took his stand with the orthodox and lined up his targets.

I have always felt that Houdini was initially honest, even if publicly-minded, in insisting that mediumship, particularly physical mediumship, could be faked. He himself had hoaxed audiences with fake mediumship, and in his mind to be able to trick an audience was to do so. In his early days he had simulated the kind of séance in which material objects are supposed to move by supernatural power, and added assumed authenticity to the act by having himself handcuffed, tied to a chair and placed in a cabinet in such fashion that the audience concurred in his assertion that he could not possibly be the one to set off the tambourine, bell and other paraphernalia on the table in front of the cabinet. Lights went out and the ensuing jingling and knocking were very convincing, as well they might be since Houdini was able to extricate himself from the handcuffs in a matter of seconds, set off his "effects," and relock himself before the lights went on.

Houdini the Exposer of Mediums

Years later, when he was much more widely known, he acknowledged his former fraudulence and developed an act in which he demonstrated the many devices and tricks which he said he had found mediums using. It was after his mother died, however, that he turned to exposing mediums in the big-time manner. It has always seemed to me that he was striking out at people who believed what he himself could not believe - that life goes on. He would leave no one with comfort he could not have. His sentiment for his mother ran deep, even though it often expressed itself melodramatically. There is no doubt but that Houdini informed himself in the field of psychic phenomena, but always from the point of view of looking for the catch. When he read a report based on the testimony of top scientists, he merely averred that they were not as clever as he in seeing through a ruse. He collected a pretentious library, and searched out physical mediums all over the country. Mediums who simply brought through verbal communication were branded liars before he started. He liked to uncover facts upon which to base a story of an exposé but he was not dependent upon facts. As the self-appointed exposé of fraudulent mediumship and ridiculer of Spiritualists, he built himself the biggest reputation in America, and probably in the world.

Nevertheless, that he was at times in touch with genuine communication seems to me certain from opinions I have had from persons who knew him well. I surmise that genuine trance mediums found his antagonistic attitude extremely hard to work with. It is my impression that his mother tried to reach him and could have identified herself if he had been receptive. For instance, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle reported that when he and his wife were traveling in America, Houdini and his wife Beatrice visited them for several days at their hotel in Atlantic City. By that time Lady Doyle herself had developed mediumship and did automatic writing in a semi-trance state. Doyle said that on this occasion Houdini received a general message from his mother which moved him greatly, although in spite of his emotion he would not authenticate the message. No doubt it lacked essential words he was waiting for her to say. Eventually Doyle broke with Houdini, accusing him of prejudice and duplicity.

The 'Margery' Investigation

The occasion which brought Houdini into final disrepute with most of the professional research men in the psychic field was an investigation of the famous physical medium Margery, wife of Dr. L. R. G. Crandon, for sixteen years professor of surgery at Harvard University Medical School, conducted by *The Scientific American*. The investigating committee was composed of impeccable scientists and psychologists, including Gardner Murphy, now director of research at Menninger Foundation. Houdini asked to be added to the committee. As the séances continued the publicity became increasingly doubtful of Houdini's scrupulousity, not to say impartiality, and made public statement of the fact.

By that time Houdini's reputation was at stake. If distinguished men could prove him wrong in his accusations, the whole country would have a chuckle at his expense, and to be laughed at was one thing he could never accept. Moreover, his enemies the Spiritualists - or so he considered them - would also have a field day. Actually, many Spiritualists had defended Houdini, being more eager than anyone else to have their ranks cleared of frauds.

This was the state of ferment in 1926 when Houdini died, leaving a widely publicized message that if there were anything to the claim for survival he would get through to his wife, Bessie, with a code message which only she could decipher. That this curious last message would have anything to do with my future would have seemed a farfetched idea at the time.

Showdown with magician Howard Thurston

However, the Houdini virus was contagious and other magicians also broke out in eruptions against spiritualism and mediumship. Among the best known of the magicians was Howard Thurston. Thurston was a tall, suave and handsome man, whom I had always considered a thorough gentleman. Therefore I was surprised when in 1927, the old *New York World* ran a story to the effect that Thurston claimed he had exposed over three hundred mediums, that Spiritualism had broken up more homes than the old-time saloon, and that he had a gadget resembling a watchcase in which was concealed a rubber spook that could be blown up and operated in such fashion that it could duplicate all the phenomena of the séance room. I asked the *World* to let me answer this story, but they refused. There was nothing particularly newsworthy about me. But the United Press Association indicated that they would carry my reply if I made a good story.

Now how could I make a good story of fraudulent accusation of fraud? I thought over the fact that magicians such as Houdini and Thurston kept on issuing open challenges to mediums, offering ten thousand dollars for the production of any stunt they could not reproduce by trickery. I felt there had been about enough of this talk and that someone should make some kind of public refutation which would carry weight. Therefore when a friend of mine, with United Press, suggested that I turn the tables and offer ten thousand dollars to Thurston if he could prove his charges, I was held back only by ten thousand good reasons. Another friend, John Bowman, president of the Bowman Biltmore Hotel Corporation, overheard the suggestion and handed me a certified check. It was posted and I challenged Thurston.

Now the press had a story they could use with relish and they did a thorough coverage. Thurston began to explain to his friends that his press agent had overplayed his hand. But the press demanded a showdown. So a night was set when we were to meet in Carnegie Hall. In spite of the publicity I was surprised to find the Hall packed. Apparently all the magicians were there and the press was amply represented, not to overlook the public.

I spoke first and challenged Thurston, "I will not ask for the names of the three hundred mediums you have exposed, but ask only that you give me the name and address, time, and place of exposure of twenty-five, along with proof that you did expose them." Thurston named only three, none of them living. I could have done better than that. I then asked him to give me the names of only twenty-five families that had been broken up over Spiritualism. He had no names. I could have furnished them, knowing the movement better than he did, for there are always individuals who make a mania of their particular religious beliefs and ride their families to death.

He grew more nervous as we approached the matter of his rubber spook. I explained to the audience the method of testing physical mediumship. However, without these customary preliminaries, I was only going to ask that in good light before the audience Thurston produce this rubber spook and let it walk over to me and tell me the real name of my father. Certainly a kindergarten test for a medium. But Thurston had forgotten to bring the spook along. By that time I felt sorry for him.

The next day the newspapers carried a complete account of the encounter, one paper headlining the story: **FORD AND THURSTON PUT ON SHOW AT CARNEGIE HALL ... IT FLOPPED IN THE SECOND ACT**. Thurston explained to the press again that his press agent had got him into this fiasco, hoping to capitalize on the Houdini technique for getting publicity. Reasonably, Thurston's ire was high against me, which I regretted for I admired his magicianship. I supposed our encounter was over.

Another Encounter with Thurston

About four years later I was in Detroit. Thurston had his magical show at a leading theater. I went with a friend. At one point in his routine Thurston did what he called his Spirit Cabinet Trick, and I was surprised to find on the printed program: "This is a trick to amuse you and it is NOT an attack upon the religious beliefs of anyone." When he finished this trick he called for the house lights and had them focused upon me. What next, I thought, deducing that someone had recognized me and told him I was present. Needing revenge, he would embarrass me if he could. Instead, he said to the audience, "What I have just done is a trick, but in the audience is a man whom I firmly believe can help you to communicate with your beloved dead." Then he asked me to come to his dressing room after the show.

When my friend and I went backstage to meet him, Thurston then told me that when we had our encounter in New York he knew very little about psychic things; just that everyone thinks he knows which is usually less than nothing. But he had determined to get back at me so he began sitting with reputable mediums wherever he could find one. "Now as a magician I know the limits of a trick," he said. "Under my own conditions and in my own hotel room I have proofs of survival which, satisfy me. I am now a member of the American Society for Psychical Research."

We became good friends and I later attended several séances in his house.

Communication from Houdini's Mother

I had no more contact with the magicians, except that I occasionally attended a show, until the evening of February 8, 1928, when a group of friends which included Francis Fast were having a sitting with me. During the trance Fletcher [Ford's spirit guide] announced that a woman he had not seen before was very eager to say a word. "She tells me that she is the mother of Harry Weiss, known as Houdini." Fletcher appeared very much interested in this person, and began to quote her. Fast took down her message.

"For many years," said Houdini's mother, "my son waited for one word which I was to send back. He always said that if he could get it he would believe. Conditions have now developed in the family which make it necessary for me to get my code word through before he can give his wife the code he arranged with her. If the family acts upon my code word he will be free and able to speak for himself. Mine is the word 'FORGIVE!' Capitalize that and put it in quotation marks. His wife knew the word and no one else in all the world knew it. Ask her if the word which I tried to get back all these years is not 'FORGIVE!' I tried innumerable times to say it to him. Now that he is here with me I am able to get it through. Tonight I give it to you, and Beatrice Houdini will declare it to be true."

Houdini's wife, Beatrice, Confirms Ford's Message

When I awakened and the group told me about this extra message which had been slipped in, I was not much interested. Houdini's supposed exposition of mediums had always annoyed me; I thought of him as a wonderful magician with an otherwise bigoted mind and a colossal conceit, and I did not care to have anything to do with him. However, the men at the sitting wanted to give Mrs. Houdini her message. I particularly valued the judgment of Francis Fast, and agreed. Therefore on the following day a copy of the message was taken to Mrs. Houdini. She was completely amazed, and as newspaper files attest, made a public statement over her signature that this was "the sole communication received among thousands up to this time that contained the one secret key-word known only to Houdini, his mother, and myself."

To me she wrote:

67 Payson Avenue
New York City

My dear Mr. Ford,

Today I received a special delivery letter signed by members of the First Spiritualist Church, who testify to a purported message from Houdini's mother, received through you. Strange that the word "forgive" is the word Houdini awaited in vain all his life. It was indeed the message for which he always secretly hoped, and if it had been given him while he was still alive, it would I know, have changed the entire course of his life - but it came too late. Aside from this there are one, or two trivial inaccuracies - Houdini's mother called him Ehrich - there was nothing in the message which could be contradicted. I might also say that this is the first message which I have received among thousands which has an appearance of truth.

Sincerely yours,

Beatrice Houdini

That one word "forgive" was not the whole of the mother's message to her daughter-in-law but the rest was of an intimate family nature which concerned Mrs. Houdini and her husband's relatives.

In that first séance the last thing Fletcher had reported about Houdini's mother was simply, "She is going now, and she says that since this message has come through it will open the channel for the other." The other to which she referred was a pact Houdini had made with his wife. He had sworn to get a message through to her if such a thing as survival should prove real. The message was to be based upon a ten-word code which they had used in one of their early shows and which no one but himself and his wife had ever known. The press had given considerable coverage to their agreement. In the months following his death interested persons in various parts of the world were constantly purporting to have received the message from Houdini. And just as regularly Mrs. Houdini disclaimed the messages. It was a poor month when there was no newspaper mention of Houdini and his code.

Breaking the Houdini Code

After the message from Houdini's mother, no further word came for several months. To be sure, no one made any attempt to follow up. Then in November, 1928, the first word of Houdini's own message came through in a sitting for a group of friends, none of whom had known Houdini. The spelling out of the entire message took a portion of eight separate sittings covering a period of two and one-half months. Four of the sittings were with groups of friends and four with individuals, one a New York physician, Dr. John Tanner, and another, Mr. Hamilton Emmons, of England, then visiting in this country.

Fletcher's method was to announce a word as he got it, no matter what else he happened to be talking about, and then apparently to wait until he was sure of another word and make another opportunity. One night he announced, "The first word is ROSABELLE and it is going to unlock the rest." A fortnight later a second word was added - NOW. At a third sitting Fletcher said, "Here is a lady I've been working with for a long time but the only word I get from her tonight is LOOK. This is the sixth word in the code." The sitters presumed that the lady to whom he referred was Houdini's mother. Still later Fletcher asked that four new words be added - ROSABELLE, ANSWER, PRAY and TELL.

At the next to last sitting, Fletcher said, "Let me give you the words from the beginning, because I have to work hard to get them." His last comment was, "This man tells me now that he has put the next five words, which explain these, in French. I have not got them yet. I want to give you the other words because, working on the French words, I may forget the others."

At the final sitting Fletcher said, "This man who is communicating tells me it has taken him three months working out of the confusion to get these words through, and that at no time has he been able to do anything without his mother's help. TELL - that is the last word." You now have ten words. Go over them carefully. It has been a hard job getting them through, but I tell you, he says, fairly shouting, 'they are right!' Now he wants to dictate the exact message you are now to take to his wife. This is to be written down in longhand, no notes."

Fletcher then asked the time, which was 9:23 P.M. He said this was to be noted; also that the medium was in deep trance, that the medium's pulse was at that moment sixty-three, which he asked to have verified; also he wanted the names of those present set down. Fletcher then continued with great exactness, "A man who says he is Harry Houdini, but whose real name was Ehrich Weiss, is here and wishes to send to his wife, Beatrice Houdini, the ten-word code which he agreed to do if it were possible for him to communicate. He says you are to take this message to her and upon acceptance of it, he wishes her to follow out the plan they agreed upon before his passing. This is the code:

"ROSABELLE ** ANSWER TELL ** PRAY ** ANSWER ** LOOK ** TELL ANSWER ** ANSWER ** TELL.

"He wants this message in ink by no danger on present. He says the code is known only to him and to his wife, and that no one on earth but those two know it. He says there is no other on that score, and that she must make it public. Announcement must come from her. You are nothing more than agents. He says that when this comes through there will be a veritable storm, that many will seek to destroy her and she will be accused of everything that is not good, but she is honest enough to keep the pact which they repeated over and over before his death. He says, 'I know that she will be happy, because neither of us believed it would be possible.'"

Fletcher then added, "Her husband says that on receipt of this message she must set a time, as soon as possible, when she will sit with this instrument while I Fletcher, speak to her, and after he has repeated this message to her, she is to return a code to him which will be understood by her and by him alone. The code that will be returned by her will be a supplement to this code, and the two together will spell a word which sums it all up, and that word will be the message which he wants to send back. He refuses to give that word until he gives it to her."

The following day two members of the group, Mr. Fast and Mr. John W. Stafford, associate editor of *The Scientific American*, both strangers to Mrs. Houdini, as were all the members of the group, delivered the message to her. She was lying on a couch, having suffered a fall in the week previous. She read the report, then stirred with emotion, dropped it at her side, and said, "It is right!" Then after a moment she asked in wondering, "Did he say ROSABELLE?" Upon being assured that he had, she exclaimed, "My God! What else did he say?" They repeated all this word for word.

Houdini Communicates with Beatrice

Following her husband's suggestions, she arranged to have me come to her house the next day, accompanied by three members of the group and a representative of the press. Two of her own friends joined us.

As soon as I was well into the trance, Fletcher came through, announcing, "This man is coming now, the same one who came the other night. He tells me to say, 'Hello, Bess, sweetheart,' and he wants to repeat the message and finish it for you. He says the code is one that you used to use in one of your secret mind-reading acts." Then Fletcher repeated the ten words as he said Houdini was giving them to him. "He wants you to tell him whether they are right or not."

Mrs. Houdini replied, "Yes, they are."

"He smiles and says, 'Thank you, now I can go on.' He tells you to take off your wedding ring and tell them what ROSABELLE means."

Drawing her left hand from under the cover she took off the ring and holding it before her sang in a small voice:

*Rosabelle, sweet Rosabelle,
I love you more than I can tell,
O'er me you cast a spell,
I love you, my Rosabelle!*

Fletcher continued, "He says, 'I thank you, darling. The first time I heard you sing that song was in our first show together years ago.'"

Mrs. Houdini nodded her head in assent.

"Then there is something he wants me to tell you that no one but his wife knows," Fletcher went on. "He smiles now and shows me a picture and draws the curtains so, or in this manner.

Evidently that was the clue for the unfoldment of the next part of the code, for Mrs. Houdini responded in French, "*Je tire le rideau comme ça.*"

Through Fletcher, Houdini went on, "And now the nine words besides ROSABELLE spell a word in our code." Very exactly he then explained the code. "The second word in our code was ANSWER. B is the second letter in the alphabet so ANSWER stands for B. The fifth word in the code is TELL, and the fifth letter of the alphabet is e. The twelfth letter in the alphabet is L and to make up twelve we have to use the first and second words of the code."

Continuing in this intricate way to the end he said, "The message I want to send back to my wife is: 'ROSABELLE, BELIEVE!'"

Fletcher then asked, "Is this right?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Houdini, with great feeling.

In conclusion Fletcher repeated Houdini's final words. "He says, 'Tell the whole world that Harry Houdini still lives and will prove it a thousand times and more.' He is pretty excited. He says, 'I was perfectly honest and sincere in trying to disprove survival, though I resorted to tricks to prove my point for the simple reason that I did not believe communication was true, but I did no more than seemed justifiable.' I am now sincere in knowing that life is through in my desire to undo. Tell all those who lost faith because of my mistake to lay hold again of hope, and to live with the sendings that life is continuous. That is my message to the world, through my wife and through this instrument.'"

The code was:

1. Pray =	A	6. Please =	F
2. Answer =	B	=	
3. Say =	C	7. Speak =	G
4. Now =	D	=	
5. Tell =	E	8. Quickly =	H
		=	
		9. Look =	I
		10. Be =	J
		quick =	

The message itself was:

Answer = B
Tell = E
Pray, answer (1 and 2) = L
Look = I
Tell = E
Answer, answer (2 and 3) = V
Tell = E

The code had been a handy device employed in Houdini's instructions to his wife during their act. Mrs. Houdini commented that the code was such a secret that "even though the stage-hands knew the words, no one except Houdini and myself knew the cipher, or the key, and its application."

Was it a Hoax?

From the moment that Mrs. Houdini pronounced the message genuine there began a flood of attack ranging from the ludicrous to the vicious. Mrs. Houdini's veracity was questioned; she was accused of giving the code to someone who then gave it to me - as if there could be any comfort for her in securing a message she already knew from a source she did not believe existed. She was also accused for selling out her own husband who had so widely publicized his conviction that all mediums were fakes. Consistently she avowed the genuineness of the messages and defended having made them public. "It was what he wanted me to do, and I am doing it."

I was likewise accused of fraud, of course, and was once also approached by an ingenious blackmailier. Then a man impersonating me fabricated a newspaper story, which only one tabloid printed, after which he confessed his hoax under promise of immunity from criminal prosecution. Three individuals brought charges to the United Spiritualist League of New York City that I had been in cahoots with Mrs. Houdini and the press. The president of the board of trustees of the First Spiritualist Church redeemed my character. Mrs. Houdini stood her ground, and the respectable press was meticulously fair. I never attempted to collect any of the fabulous sums offered for breaking the Houdini code, although I am sure a legal case could have been made. However, I did receive an enormous amount of publicity. Maybe Houdini had a hand in that! He may have been paying his respects to the fact that my act had been performed not while handcuffed but while sound asleep.

Note:

The above article was taken from Arthur Ford's "Nothing So Strange" (New York: Harper and Row, 1958). It was originally titled "A Round with the Magicians". The sub-headings were added by the webmaster of this website.

Facsimile of statement made by Mrs. Houdini the day after receipt of the message. Witnesses: Mr. H. R. Zander, Representative of the United Press; Mrs. Minnie Chester, life-long friend of Mrs. Houdini and Mr. John W. Stafford, Associate Editor of Scientific American.