



The Day Houdini (Almost) Came Back from the Dead

After magician and skeptic Harry Houdini died on October 31, 1926, scores of mediums claimed they had received a genuine message from the “soul” of the once-great skeptic and medium-basher. However, they could offer no convincing proof for such a fantastic claim. An apparently more convincing candidate, however, soon appeared on the scene. The name of the medium was Arthur Ford (1897–1971), a pastor of the First Spiritualist Church in New York City.

Ford claimed that on February 8, 1928, he went into a trance and, talking in the voice of “Fletcher,” his spirit guide, he said that a woman identifying herself as the mother of Harry Houdini was anxious to speak. The spirit stated that her son, Harry, had hoped for years to receive one particular word from her, the word *forgive*, and added that “his wife knew the word, and no one else in all the world knew it.”

Forgive was, presumably, the last word uttered by Houdini’s mother on her deathbed and did probably refer to one of Houdini’s brothers, Leopold, who had been “guilty” of marrying Sadie, the ex-wife of Nathan, another Houdini brother. To the magician, this behavior had appeared morally inexcusable and led to the “removal” of Leopold from his life. He could have not forgiven his brother unless his mother told him to; however, her death came before the matter could be discussed.

On learning of Ford’s message, Bess promptly wrote the following to Ford:

Strange that the word *forgive* is the word Houdini awaited in vain all of his life. It was indeed the message for which he always secretly hoped, and if had been given to 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 which has an appearance of truth.



A poster for Houdini’s campaign against fraudulent mediums.

Ford’s supporters announced that Bess’s letter confirmed the authenticity of the message, since the word *forgive* could only be known by Houdini, his mother, and his wife. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, typically, considered the message genuine and “an outstanding case.” The public, however, remained skeptical. The press, in fact, reported that the keyword had already appeared in print nearly a year before, on March 13, 1927, in the *Brooklyn Eagle*. In an interview she had given to the paper, Bess had specified that any authentic communication purporting to come from Houdini would

have included the word *forgive*. Furthermore, it was not true, as the “spirit” of Houdini’s mother had said, that “no one else in all the world” besides her, Houdini, and Bess knew of the word; at the time of her death, in fact, her magician son was touring Europe with his wife. The son who was at Mrs. Houdini’s deathbed was Theodore.

A few months later, on January 5, 1929, Ford announced that he had received the tenth and final code word of a message from Houdini. The following day, accompanied by members of his church, Ford went to Payson Avenue, where Bess had moved after Houdini’s death. They found Bess lying on a couch, suffering from a fall down a flight of stairs—probably provoked by a drinking habit she had developed. In an account written for the *New York Evening Graphic* before Ford’s visit, Bess was described as being in a “semidelirium,” calling for Houdini to return. She blacked out from time to time and was “under constant care of physicians.” It was in this state, then, that Ford’s message was read to her; it stated: “Rosabelle, answer, tell, pray-answer, look, tell, answer-answer, tell.”

A séance was fixed for January 8, shortly after noon. Ford went into a trance and began speaking through what he claimed was Houdini’s voice. The voice repeated the message and then said: “Thank you, sweetheart, now take off your wedding ring and tell them what ‘Rosabelle’ means.” Bess, lying on a sofa, took off her ring and began to sing: “Rosabelle, sweet Rosabelle, I love you more than I can tell. Over me you cast a spell. I love you, my sweet Rosabelle.”

Ford, still speaking as Houdini, explained that “Rosabelle” was the song

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sung by his wife in their early days. The other code letters in the message formed the word “believe.” Before leaving, the purported voice of Houdini said: “Spare no time or money to undo my attitude of doubt while on earth. Now that I have found my way back, I can come often sweetheart. Give yourself to placing the truth before all those who have lost the faith and want to take hold again. Believe me, life is continuous. Tell the world there is no death. I will be close to you. I expect to use this instrument [Ford] many times in the future. Tell the world, sweetheart, that Harry Houdini lives and will prove it a thousand times.”

The secret code was the one used by Houdini and Bess when, in the early days of their career, they used to present in their show a telepathy act similar to others of the time. The code consisted of ten units with each unit standing for a digit and each digit, in turn, representing the position in the alphabet of a letter in the coded message:

Pray = 1 = A
 Answer = 2 = B
 Say = 3 = C
 Now = 4 = D
 Tell = 5 = E
 Please = 6 = F
 Speak = 7 = G
 Quickly = 8 = H
 Look = 9 = I
 Be quick = 10 or 0 = J

Double-digit letters were indicated by combinations of the code words. For example, the fourteenth word, N, would be signaled by the phrase “pray (1), now (4).” In Ford's message the nine words following “Rosabelle” formed the word *Believe* in this manner: Answer (B), tell (E), pray-answer (L), look (I), tell (E), answer-answer (V), tell (E).

Ford's group insisted that Bess issue another statement. It was written on Bess's personal stationery but by someone else, as the handwriting reveals. She was then asked to sign it. It read: “Regardless of any statements made to the contrary, I wish to declare that the message in its entirety and in the agreed-upon sequence, given to me by Arthur Ford is the correct message pre-arranged between Mr. Houdini and myself.”

Not everybody was convinced, however. Magician, mentalist, and friend of Houdini Joseph Dunninger went to Bess's house and reminded her that the “secret code” had not been secret since its publication, the previous year, on page 105 of *Houdini, His Life Story*, the authorized biography written by Harold Kellock and based on Bess's “recollections and documents.”

“I have seen it stated in the papers,” Doyle would later write to Kellock on this point, “that this accounts for Ford getting a posthumous message. This, however, I am sure you realize, is not correct. It was not the cipher that formed the test, but it was the message which was written in the cipher, and Ford could not have got that out of your book.”



A portrait of Houdini with his wife, Bess.

Bess, however, had stated to the *New York World* on January 9: “I had no idea what combination of words Harry would use and when he sent ‘believe’ it was a surprise.” Also, the fact that Houdini had had four lines of the song “Rosabelle” engraved inside Bess's wide gold wedding ring was hardly a secret.

“The Message is a Hoax!”

Two days after the séance, the notorious scandal-sheet, the *New York Evening Graphic*, headlined: “HOUDINI MESSAGE A BIG HOAX!—‘Séance’ Pre-arranged by ‘Medium’ and Widow.” The allegation was that Bess herself had given Ford the code in order to promote a lecture tour that the two were supposed to do together. The news caused an uproar, and Bess, still ill, wrote a moving letter to Walter Winchell, a columnist of the *Evening Graphic*:

This letter is not for publicity, I do not need publicity. I want to let Houdini's old friends know that I did not betray his trust. I am writing this personally because I wish to tell you emphatically that I was no party to any fraud.

Now regarding the séance: For two years I have been praying to receive the message from my husband; for two years every day I have received messages from all parts of the world. Had I wanted a publicity



The medium Arthur Ford at the bed of a sick Beatrice Houdini. She can be seen in the bed with her head bandaged.



The cover of a 1928 booklet detailing Houdini's spirit exposés.

stunt I could no doubt have chosen any of these sensational messages. When I repudiated these messages no one said a word, excepting the writers who said I did not have the nerve to admit the truth.

When the real message, *the* message that Houdini and I agreed upon, came to me and I accepted it as the truth, I was greeted with jeers. Why? Those who denounce the whole thing as a fraud claim that I had given Mr. Arthur Ford the message. If Mr. Ford said this I brand him a liar. Mr. Ford has stoutly denied saying this ugly thing, and knowing the reporter as well as I do I prefer to believe Mr. Ford. Others say the message has been common property and known to them for some time. Why do they tell me this now, when they know my heart was hungry for the true words from my husband? The many stories told about me I have no way to tell the world the truth of or the untruth, for I have no paper at my beck and call; everyone has a different opinion of how the message was obtained. With all these different tales I would not even argue. However, when anyone accuses me of *giving* the words that my husband and I labored so long to convince ourselves of the truth of communication, then I will fight and fight until the breath leaves my body.

If anyone claims I gave the code, I can only repeat they lie. Why should I want to cheat myself? I do not need publicity. I have no intention of going on the stage or, as some paper said, on a lecture tour. My husband made it possible for me to live

in the greatest comfort. I do not need to earn money. I have gotten the message I have been waiting for from my husband, how, if not by spiritual aid, I do not know.

And now, after I told the world that I have received the true message, everyone seems to have known of the code, yet never told me. They left it to Mr. Ford to tell me, and I am accused of giving the words. It is all so confusing. In conclusion, may I say that God and Houdini and I know that I did not betray my trust. For the rest of the world I really ought not to care a hang, but somehow I do, therefore this letter. Forgive its length.

Sincerely yours,
Beatrice Houdini

When it became known that Ford was using a copy of Bess's signed statement in some of his advertisements, Bernard M.L. Ernst, Houdini's and then Bess's lawyer, saw the possibility of a lawsuit against Ford. In reply, Bess wrote to him:

I wish to say that I did sign the letter. . . . I did not say that I believed that the message came through spiritual aid or that I believed in spiritualism. I did say the words I heard were the words I expected to hear, etc. . . . I had a copy of the original letter I wrote to him somewhere but I am too ill to look for it and I really don't care. I never said I believed the letter came from Houdini. I never said I believed in spiritualism and I still say the same. I don't care what Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Will Goldston say or do. I

don't and never did believe the message genuine nor did I believe in spiritualism. I will write you clearly later if you will just give me a chance to get well. I don't care what you do to or about Mr. Ford.

Ernst didn't bring Ford to court, but the medium was, nonetheless, expelled from the United Spiritualist League of New York. At least for a short while; shortly afterward he was reinstated "on the ground of insufficient proof" as to his possible fraud.

Bess disavowed Ford's message countless times. "There was a time," she told an interviewer later in her life, "when I wanted intensely to hear from Harry. I was ill, both physically and mentally, and such was my eagerness that spiritualists were able to prey upon my mind and make me believe that they had really heard from him."

On March 19, 1930, Bess also asked Ernst to issue a statement reading thus: "For three years she had sought to penetrate beyond the grave and communicate with her husband, but had now renounced faith in such a possibility: she denied that any of the mediums presented the clew [clue] by which she was to recognize a legitimate message."

And so Houdini, who for a little while had appeared to have returned from the afterlife, was finally let to rest in the only inescapable prison that was able to hold him: death. ■