



Youthful photograph of Arthur Ford, best-known American medium of modern times, who died in January 1971.

ARTHUR FORD

The Man Who

Talked with the Dead

By Allen Spraggett with William V. Rauscher, New American Library, New York, N.Y., 1973, distributed by W. W. Norton, 301 pages, \$7.95.

Reviewed by Curtis Fuller

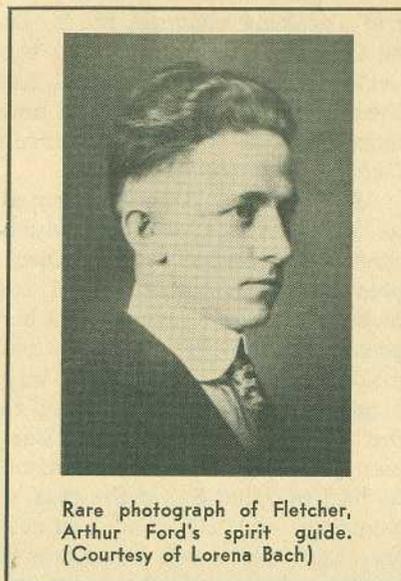
HOW CAN one deal with a man who was probably the greatest medium of his time, whose trances produced some of the most evidential seance material of our century, who was regarded almost as a saint by some of his followers and at the same time was an alcoholic, a sometime stretcher-of-the-truth, and possibly a cheat?

If Arthur Ford was a puzzle to me who knew him only slightly, imagine what a greater enigma

he was to Allen Spraggett who knew him better and especially to the Rev. Canon William V. Rauscher, who knew him extraordinarily well over a number of years. This sense of seeking to understand is set forth in Father Rauscher's foreword and continued in his epilogue. In his foreword, Rauscher writes:

"Arthur Ford was the most puzzling human being I have ever known or am likely to know — indeed, can imagine

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Rare photograph of Fletcher, Arthur Ford's spirit guide. (Courtesy of Lorena Bach)

knowing. He was an almost incredible mixture of heaven and earth; a man who lived in two worlds but was at home in neither. The only thing that makes him credible is that he really lived."

The book then sets forth, in thoughtful but fast-paced prose, what must be the best possible appraisal at this moment in time of this giant among mediums, this strange and difficult man. Allen Spraggett's book, written with the help and collaboration of William Rauscher who is Arthur's literary executor, is an intelligent, well-written, documented biography.

Spraggett begins his account with a personal experience. He and his wife Marian called for Arthur at the Park Plaza Hotel in New York City to take him to dinner and as they arrived at the hotel saw the entourage of King Constantine of Greece and his queen leaving. Spraggett joked with Ford about inviting the king to a seance and Arthur agreed, remarking as he nonchalantly lighted a cigar, "I knew his uncle very well."

Ford also knew Queen Maud of Norway who presented him with a diamond signet, members of the British Royal Family and the great and near-great on two continents during a career that spanned nearly 50 years.

ARTHUR FORD was born in Titusville, Fla., of a Baptist mother and a father who was a nonpracticing Episcopalian with Unitarian leanings. Brought up in Fort Pierce, Fla., as a rather strict Baptist Arthur developed ideas that were heretical for that strict faith and he was kicked out of the church at the age of 16. The following year he joined the more liberal Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and attended Johnson Academy in Tennessee because Fort Pierce then had only a two-year high school. In the fall of 1917 Arthur was offered a ministerial scholarship

to Transylvania College in Lexington, Ky. However, World War I was underway and although Arthur's ministerial status would have given him exemption he enlisted in the army and was commissioned a lieutenant in September 1918.

Up to this point Arthur Ford's life had been one of southern small-town provincialism. But now began the psychic events that were to transform him into a debonair worldly sophisticate, an international traveler.

The terrible influenza epidemic hit Camp Grant, Ill., where Arthur was stationed and each day a list of those who had died during the previous 24 hours was published. One morning, Ford reported in his autobiography, he awoke with the names of those who had died of the flu during the previous 24 hours firmly fixed in his mind. He thought it was a nightmare until the list was published—verifying his dream. Each night for a week Ford dreamed the names that would be posted on the next day's death list. Several times he dreamed the casualty lists of members of his company who had gone overseas. He said he knew nothing of Spiritualism at this time and thought he might be cracking up. His visions continued, however, and on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, he

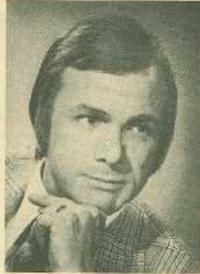
had a waking vision of his brother George who was also in the army stationed in the South. Arthur correctly felt it was an ominous sign for shortly afterwards George died of the flu.

After the war Arthur returned to Transylvania College which shared its campus with a Disciples of Christ Divinity School. He took the combined course but his preaching abilities were so remarkable that before he was graduated he accepted a call to the Christian Church in Barbourville, Ky. In the meantime he had married Sallie Stewart, a Kentucky girl. His grades in college had been mediocre but as a minister Arthur Ford was sensational. At Barbourville less than two years, the young preacher more than doubled the congregation, installed a pipe organ, organized a social service department, obtained a musical director and "made many other improvements in the church," according to the local paper which lamented his leaving.

He left Barbourville to join a Chautauqua circuit in New England and was so successful that he was asked to tour New York State. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* called him "the most fascinating and brilliant personality to appear on this season's lecture platform."

Ford soon was lecturing to en-

Newsman Allen Spraggett (left) and the Rev. Canon William Rauscher based their biography of Ford on years of personal acquaintance as well as on his letters and documents.



thusiastic audiences in Carnegie Hall and moved to New York City. He also began to develop his mediumistic gifts. He appeared on platforms giving clairvoyant readings and claimed to have studied under Paramahansa Yogananda, at one time attributing his abilities to his studies under an "Eastern Master." Then in 1924 Fletcher appeared and henceforth was Arthur Ford's guide into the realms of mystery and magic.

Fletcher was the "spirit guide" or "control" who took over when Arthur went into trance, replacing the direct clairvoyant reading method Ford had used for what purported to be direct communications with the spirit world. According to Arthur, Fletcher identified himself while Ford was in trance as having been a French Canadian boy who lived across the river from the Ford family in Fort Pierce. His family had re-

turned to Canada and Fletcher reported (again according to Ford) that he had been killed in World War I while serving in the Canadian Army. On other occasions, however, Ford identified Fletcher as having been a "college mate and fraternity brother of mine killed in the war."

At any rate, Fletcher would appear shortly after Ford went through the ritual of settling himself in a chair, covering his eyes with a handkerchief and falling into a trance.

Allen Spraggett devotes an entire chapter to exploring the mystery of this soft-spoken trance personality with the slight French accent. He reports the details of seemingly unassailably veridical seances and examines the main psychological theories that seek to explain the mysteries of purported spirit communicators. Ford himself believed that Fletcher was a discarnate entity and certainly he was a

Spraggett points out that "the Houdini code — not the message, but the code itself — was a poorly kept secret since it had been published the year before by Harold Kellock in his biography of Houdini." However, the code alone would not have been much help without knowing the message which was to be conveyed by it. "And neither the word 'Rosabelle' nor the word 'believe' had been printed anywhere in connection with the Houdini message." The preponderance of evidence here seems to be with Arthur Ford.

The Bishop Pike affair was the second most-publicized event of Ford's career. It took place not so long ago and the details are rather well known — how the controversial Episcopal bishop sought to communicate through mediums with his dead son, James, Jr., a suicide at age 20, and how Arthur (or Fletcher) produced material that was highly convincing to Pike. Even more sensational were the circumstances of the seance — a Toronto TV program arranged by Spraggett himself, who is a well-known Canadian journalist and TV figure.

There were many seemingly evidential points in the Ford-Pike seance. But then, in studying Arthur Ford's files after his death, Rauscher came across

positive evidence that Arthur had researched portions of it in advance! For example, Ford's files contained a *New York Times* obituary of Bishop Karl Morgan Block, Bishop Pike's Episcopal predecessor in California. It contained trivial details about Block which Arthur-Fletcher had recounted in the seance and which "Pike considered especially evidential since their very triviality seemed to rule out the possibility of prior research by the medium . . . every one of these supposedly unresearchable items was mentioned in the *New York Times* obituary." The two researchers found other evidence that Ford had "a marked propensity for clipping obituaries."

Rauscher and Spraggett also interviewed a former male secretary of Ford's who said that Ford always did research on important people he sat for, using *Who's Who*, school records and the like. Yet this same secretary believed that Arthur also obtained much of his information clairvoyantly. And strangely enough, in the interview he denied that Ford drank — although among Ford's friends his drinking problems were a matter of primary concern. (He once told my wife, "I'm not a reformed alcoholic; I'm a retired drunk." We knew him well enough to know that he intermittently came out of re-

far different personality than Ford himself.

The late '20's and '30's were salad years for Arthur Ford. He was pastor of the First Spiritualist Church of New York. He was mentioned in the gossip columns of the metropolitan newspapers. He went to Europe and stunned audiences — in England particularly — with his clairvoyant performances. In London a *Daily Express* reporter called one of Ford's demonstrations "the most astounding, inexplicable thing I have ever seen." In Berlin the *Berliner Mittag* stated that he "completely awed a huge audience." A Stockholm newspaper reported that 2500 people "sat in amazement" and he was later asked to give a private sitting to Queen Maud. He also gave sittings to King George II of Greece and his brother King Paul. "No medium since D. D. Home almost a century earlier," writes Spraggett, "had been so feted, acclaimed, publicized."

The two most sensational events in Arthur's life — at least the most highly publicized — were the Houdini message and the Bishop Pike seance on television in Toronto. The book explores these two cases in detail and brings new evidence to bear on their authenticity. These two incidents also help us to understand what kind of man the me-

dium Arthur Ford really was.

Houdini, of course, was the great American conjurer who gained enormous publicity by his attacks on Spiritualism. Yet in his secret heart he must have wanted to believe in the spirit world. When he died he left a message for his wife Beatrice in the secret code they had used to communicate with each other on the stage. Thousands of professional and amateur Spiritualists and magicians had tried to break the code and deliver the message to Mrs. Houdini but none came close until Arthur Ford, with Fletcher, developed the message over a period of days. It was a complex process. A number of code words finally spelled out the simple injunction, "Rosabelle, believe!" The final solution came through at a dramatic seance which Mrs. Houdini attended and at which she attested to its truth.

An emotional storm greeted the news of this seance. The *New York Graphic* cried that it was a fraud. Red herrings were drawn across the story. Cheating by Ford was alleged. It is the fate of such emotionally charged and controversial events never to be wholly resolved. And Beatrice Houdini's own behavior became erratic in later years and she then denied that which she previously had sworn to.

tirement.) At any rate how could a secretary have known Arthur cheated and not known he drank? So the authors found substantial evidence that Ford had researched many of the details of the Pike seance but at the same time they found that Fletcher mentioned strange facts in asides that they believe could not have been researched by anyone — Pike's feelings about certain persons and the junior James Pike's relations with a man named Marvin Halverson whom the father barely remembered and had not known was an important influence on his son.

All in all, Spraggett concludes, the evidence is "disquietingly strong" that Arthur was a gifted psychic who "fell back on trickery when he felt he had to."

Even after the evidence was presented to Diane Pike, the bishop's widow, she wrote: "I have reread the transcript of that sitting and I am still very impressed — I guess I would have to say equally impressed — with the amount of personal data that it seems virtually impossible for Arthur Ford to have researched." She then listed six specific items that seemed convincing to her.

Over the years Arthur gave sittings for thousands of persons and a high proportion of them were convinced. Spraggett him-

self is one of them. In one seance Ford gave Spraggett information about the illness and death of his father which never had been published and was not known beyond the intimate circle of the family. All evidence suggests that Arthur Ford, at the height of his powers, had incredible psychic ability.

John J. O'Neill, later the Pulitzer Prizewinning science editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*, described one public lecture attended by approximately 1000 persons. After the lecture Arthur gave clairvoyant readings from the platform to about 30 persons picked at random from the audience. "A man picked from the rear of the hall was told that he was a newspaperman and had been sent by the editor to get a story razzing the meeting. The full details of how he got the assignment were told and this was followed by a very extensive family history, including a list with names and dates of the members of his family and relatives who had passed over and the circumstances of their deaths." Spraggett suspects the newspaperman was O'Neill himself.

Another newspaperman Ford shook up was Joseph Carlton Beal of the *Boston Transcript* who had written a novel attacking Spiritualism. He was picked

out of an audience of several hundred persons by Ford who said he had a message from Beal's father. He gave Beal an explicit message in which the father described a letter he once had written to his son when the latter was a boy and he quoted three lines from it: "God bless your little heart. I send you a million XXXXX. With love to my boy, Pa." Beal was taken aback and refused to acknowledge the truth of the message. Arthur replied in his usual manner, advising him to "check it out."

Beal returned home, found the letter which he thought had been destroyed and was astonished to find that the last three lines were exactly as Arthur had quoted them. He then wrote Ford telling him that the information he had received "was known to nobody but my dead father and myself." He apologized for the chapter in his novel which had ridiculed Spiritualism.

Ford's autobiography *Nothing So Strange* was published in 1958 and Siegfried Mandel, book reviewer for the *Saturday Review*, concluded that it had to be fiction. Before writing his review, however, he decided to attend one of Ford's private sessions which included a group of about 17 persons. Mandel later wrote:

"When Fletcher addressed me, I greeted him politely and in

turn a series of persons I had known made comments and remarks that were so personal that my hair stood on end. Some allusions, names and predictions did not register but Fletcher said to write them down and check further. I tried to account for this strange demonstration in several ways but had to reject hypnosis, telepathy, psychological guesswork, trickery, research and photographic memory. Admittedly, this leaves little by way of explanation, except to acknowledge an extraordinary psychic performance by the Ford-Fletcher team."

There were hundreds of such triumphs. Ford seems to have made an especially deep impression in Europe. In England one reporter said that during a clairvoyant demonstration he "rattled off names, Christian and surnames, of the unseen visitors with an infallibility that was truly astounding." After such a demonstration the famous British journalist Hannen Swaffer reported a meeting he had chaired, saying "all those present had viewed either the most stupendous fraud ever perpetrated or a miracle."

As he grew older Ford drank more and probably lost some of his abilities. Nevertheless, he continued to have extremely impressive sittings with such men

to attract attention — if a wandering shepherd were nearby. Accordingly we began to burn a paper, sheet by sheet. After what seemed ages but probably was only a moment or two we heard an eerie call coming from near the stone cottage where I believed "Old Jake," a shepherd, had lived. I often had seen him near there with this flock.

"Is everything all right, lads?" called the voice.

"Yes," we called back, "but we would like directions to Hayfield."

"Look for the trees, lads; look for the trees."

"What trees do you mean, sir?"

"The oaks, lads, the oaks, the o-a-k-s," came the hollow voice.

Now we remembered the line of oaks along the path to the stone bridge at the entrance to Hayfield. We shouted our thanks and started on our way. A moment later Barney asked, "I say, Bill, was that Old Jake?"

"It couldn't have been," I replied. "He died more than a year ago."

"Well, it sure sounded like him. I wonder if he has come back to haunt the moors?"

We turned to look for some sign of life but even in its snow-dimmed outline the dark cottage looked cold and desolate, apparently empty. We remembered the oaks were in line with the

shepherd's cottage and tried to make our way to the first one. As the wind whipped the snow around us we had to link arms to stay together. We wound our scarves across our faces, leaving only our eyes bare to the stinging, biting wind.

Finally we reached the first oak tree and stumbled on, searching for the second. As the snow fell faster and the wind became more severe we had trouble seeing each other, let alone locating the oaks. But when we wandered off course the eerie voice came again, "Here lads, the oaks, the oaks!"

Shivering more than ever at the uncanny sound of the voice which seemed to be leading us we finally reached the second tree. We paused for a moment, relieved to know we were going in the right direction. We moved on very slowly. If we let go of each other or made a false step the moor and the storm could swallow us both.

Suddenly we heard bells — bells from the church in Hayfield ringing in the New Year. We listened to that welcome sound for a few minutes then started toward the village, knowing that the bells would ring on through the night as is customary in England. We felt we safely could follow their pealing into Hayfield.

We had gone only a few steps

as Edgar Mitchell, the astronaut.

Ford seems to have had other uncanny abilities. In 1968 while living alone at the Westbury Hotel in Philadelphia Arthur had a heart attack and went into a coma. No one knew of his plight, yet Dr. Edwin Boyle, the Miami heart specialist who was attending a meeting in New York, had the sudden urge to visit Ford whom he never had met. He found Ford's address in the Philadelphia directory, took a train to Philadelphia, went to the hotel and pounded on Arthur's door. When there was no response Boyle, although he never had done anything like this before, felt there was something wrong and got the clerk to get a key and open the room. They found Ford lying on the floor. Dr. Boyle administered emergency treatment and Arthur revived. Boyle later took charge of the case and Ford went back to Miami with him.

Bill Wilson, cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, was walking on the streets of New York one day when he had a similar powerful urge to "stop in and see Art Ford." He found Arthur again on the floor with a heart seizure and summoned help.

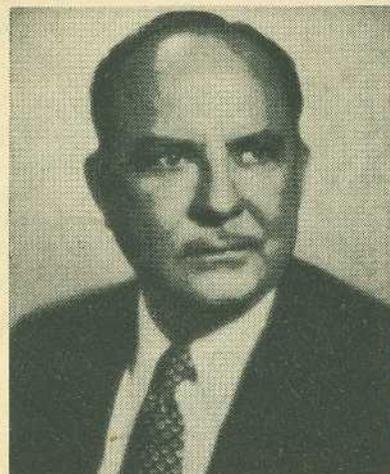
There is far more in the Spraggett-Rauscher book than recounting psychic incidents. It places Ford in the milieu of the

whole Spiritualist-psychic scene of the past five decades, giving valuable insights into the Spiritualist movement. It includes current parapsychological and psychological theories of Arthur's mediumship and attempts to explain the mystery of Fletcher. I found the historical data fascinating and the theoretical explanations interesting.

But over all towers the gigantic figure of this great medium, larger than life, all too human. Arthur Ford was a sophisticated and urbane man; he was a crude and cynical ruffian. He was a justifiable hypochondriac who had frequent brushes with death. Perhaps he didn't really lie but only had a "surrealistic approach to facts." He was a prima donna who could be modest. He was an occasional cheat who conducted campaigns against fraudulent mediums.

The history of modern Spiritualism is almost a history of Arthur Ford. But he gave up Spiritualism as a religion in an attempt to bring the psychic back into the orthodox churches through his great dedication to Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship. He was a compassionate pastor who gave up pastoral work.

Obviously one cannot fully describe, even in an important book like this, all the complexities of such a man. But there is a



ARTHUR FORD

WITH A DEEP SENSE of personal loss the editors of FATE report the death on January 4, 1971, of Arthur Ford, one of the world's great mediums. Arthur had been in poor health for many years but his friends and associates had come to think of him as immortal — on this plane, that is.

Arthur was born in 1896 in Titusville, Fla., and died four days before his 75th birthday. He spent most of his boyhood in Fort Pierce, Fla., was educated at Transylvania College and the College of the Bible in Lexington, Ky., and was ordained in 1922 in the Disciples of Christ church. He subsequently held

pastorates in Louisville and Barbourville, Ky.

As his reputation as a medium grew he worked with the American Society for Psychical Research and studied under Swami Yogananda. He traveled widely and spent 12 years of his life in Europe, where he worked with the Society for Psychical Research and with the British College of Psychic Science in London, and with other psychic societies in other European capitals. He knew Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the late 1920's and continued a mediumistic career that sometimes seemed to move from sensation to sensation. He was credited by Bessie Houdini with cracking the secret code left by her late famous husband. In more recent years he figured prominently in the belief by the late Bishop Pike that he had communicated with his dead son.

Arthur Ford was more than a successful medium. He was a brilliant and sophisticated speaker and most outspoken at times. As an investigator of psychic phenomena, including his own, he was serious and skeptical.

He considered the most important accomplishment of his life was not his mediumistic triumphs but his role in helping to found and assist in the growth of Spiritual Frontiers Fellowship, in association with such men as Sherwood Eddy, Marcus Bach, Albin Bro, Alson J. Smith and Paul Lambourne Higgins. The main purpose of "Frontiers" as Arthur saw it was to reintroduce the psychic, healing and prayer into the Christian churches. He devoted the last years of his life to helping the growth of "Frontiers." It is with a sense of shock that we realize we shall not be meeting him again at the organization's next annual conference.

— Curtis and Mary Fuller.