

The Mediumship of the Bangs Sisters and an examination of their precipitated Spirit Portraits. Part II. By N. Riley Heagerty

There would be no exaggeration in saying that Elizabeth and May Bangs were two of the finest mediums in the world for independent writing, done above-board and in full light. Slates were used and served, more or less, as a tiny 'cabinet' for the spirit operators. Rarely was both of the sisters needed for this phenomena unless extra power was required. Sitters would usually bring their own slates and blank sheets of paper; these would be put into an envelope or simply folded and put between the slates and in ways inscrutable to mortal man - as is all spiritual phenomena until he enters the world of Spirit himself - words would be precipitated on to the blank pages of paper, usually in ink, a small bottle of which would usually be placed on the table near the slates.

Without a moment more of hesitation, let us now move to the files my friends and examine some of the outstanding moments of the Bangs and their independent writing. Included also is a brief 'spirit telegraph' experience in the first excerpt. From 'Neither Dead Nor Sleeping' by May Wright Sewall, 1921, comes the following testimony which I have taken up after the authors arrival in Chicago: 'The second day after my arrival I separated myself from my friend, and presenting the letter of introduction furnished by Mr G arranged for a professional interview with its recipient at four thirty p.m. the next day. When the hour arrived rain was falling heavily and the wind was violent. Miss Bangs (May) said that the conditions were unfavourable. To my inquiry how the storm could affect the conditions, her reply was that she did not know how, but that as a fact 'the electrical conditions of the atmosphere do modify the vibrations, and they say everything depends on vibrations'. In assertions of fact, Miss Bangs was as positive as other psychics I had questioned, apparently more vague in explanation, and even more ignorant of the causes of phenomena. She said she had always from her childhood 'been accompanied by phenomena', but that of its causes she knew nothing; had never thought about cause; it did not interest her. I gained no new knowledge of principles, but I added two new facts to my accumulation of material for reflection. For the first time I received independent writing on paper, and also carried on a long coherent, satisfactory conversation by means of a private telegraphic code. As this was my first experience of them I shall describe both processes.



Lizzie & May Bangs

Miss Bangs and myself sat on opposite sides of a small table which with our two chairs, a carpet, a few framed photographs on the wall, and a few trifles on the mantel above a small fireplace, constituted the sole furniture of a small back parlour. I think its dimensions were not more than eight by ten. On top of the table were two slates and a bottle of ink.

As the process mentioned last was the first employed I describe it first. I propounded questions to my husband exactly as if he had been present in the flesh, and his replies were made as if by telegraph; the tick, tick coming to the ear exactly as if clicked on the machine at the telegraphic office, was read by Miss Bangs as an arriving telegram would be read by a telegraph operator. The answers and comments,

like my questions, pertained to subjects, persons, places and events which in the nature of things, must have been utterly unknown to the operator; but there was not an instant's hesitation nor was there an irrelevant word; and, as events proved, where the conduct of persons in relation to matters not yet matured was involved there was not one mistaken opinion uttered.

My husband told me that he had never before used this method of communication: I next wrote a letter containing numerous questions, folded it with several sheets of blank paper and sealed it in an envelope addressed to my husband; Having washed off two slates, I placed the sealed letter between them, tied them fast with my own handkerchief, and held them firmly in my hands. Miss Bangs then dropped some ordinary black ink on a small bit of ordinary blotting paper, and placed it on the upper surface of the top slate, I holding the slates firmly all the time, and I alone touching them.

In a few minutes Miss Bangs said that my letter was answered. I thereupon untied the slates and on opening the envelope I found that the paper which I had put in blank was covered with clear script in black ink in a writing resembling but not duplicating that of my husband. There were six pages, which when read proved to be an orderly, coherent, categorical reply to my letter. The answers were numbered to correspond with numbered questions. I was too astonished to have any wish but to withdraw to reread this novel communication'.

From *Glimpses of the Next State*, one of the great classics of Spiritualism and physical mediumship, by Admiral W Usborne Moore, comes the following letter he received from a gentleman of considerable influence and position in Canada. It was dated October 19, 1908, and its contents influenced Admiral Moore to go to America and investigate the Bangs Sisters. I quote the letter in its entirety: 'Our next experience was at Chicago, with the Bangs Sisters, of whom we had heard both good and evil reports. We were, in consequence, specially alert. I will leave you to judge of what we obtained there. We were told by friends who had visited them to write our questions before going to the house, and place them, with a number of blank sheets of stamped or initialled paper, inside an envelope gummed and sealed. This we did, using paper from a Toledo hotel that was decorated with a gilt monogram. We reached Chicago early on the following morning. At nine o'clock we had found the Bangs' residence, and secured an immediate séance, before the arrival of their numerous clients. We sat with Miss May Bangs. To this day she is ignorant of our names or where we came from; nor had she any inkling of our visit or its purpose. We accompanied her, each in turn, into a comfortable little boudoir on the sunny side of the house, looking out on a bit of lawn; the only window remained open. In the centre of the room was a table, four feet square, covered with a woollen cloth. The medium sat opposite to me, about a foot or more from the table; the only object on the table was an open inkstand. I said I had brought with me some questions in a sealed envelope, and hoped to obtain replies through her mediumship.

She said, "We will try". She then fetched a pair of hinged slates, the frames of which were covered with dark cloth, gave them to me, and resumed her seat, saying: 'Place your letter between the slates, close them, and secure them with these stout rubber bands; lay the slates on the table, in front of you, and place both hands flat on top of them'.

The medium's instructions having been carried out, we engaged in general conversation. Three times she interrupted the talk to ask: "Is the name or place correctly spelt?" (foreign names mentioned in my questions), showing that some knowledge of what I had written was reaching her. If I assented, or made a slight correction, she would write on a pad resting on her knee; then resumed our conversation where it had dropped.

About half-an-hour was thus spent, when three distinct raps were heard and felt by me, proceeding, apparently, from the centre of the table. Miss Bangs then said: "The séance is over; you have obtained what you are to get; you may open your envelope now or later". I opened the hinged slates, found the envelope as I had placed it, untouched and still sealed, thanked the lady, and left the room, when my brother passed in for his turn.



The Bangs Sisters home

While waiting for my brother, in the adjoining room, I slit open the end of my envelope with my penknife, and found, besides my questions, nine and a half pages of the blank paper covered with writing in ink, as if with a steel pen, duly numbered, and written at the instance of the spirit friend to whom I had addressed four out of five questions, and signed in full. The replies were categorical, giving or confirming information of great value to me personally; referring to facts and happenings of forty years ago, which the spirit and I alone were aware of; and adding the names of individuals whom I had not named in my questions, but whom we both knew in the past, and who had participated in the events referred to by me. The reply to the fifth and last question was in the form of greetings from spirit friends who were known to me when they were in earth life, and now come to me as so-called 'guides'.

When one writes rapidly a blotter is necessary at the turnover to a new page; this, apparently, was not required by the spirit writer, for the ink is the same depth of black at the foot as at the top of the pages. The handwriting of the last message (and each signature at the bottom of it) differs from that which contained replies to my first four questions.

It is not claimed that this writing is done by spirit friends themselves, but, at their dictation, by the medium's control, who has become expert in this form of manifestation. Can telepathy account for these replies? Can it explain the transfer of the ink from the bottle on the table to the folded blank pages within the sealed envelope between the slates under my hands? It would take a very fast writer at least an hour and a quarter to write what the spirit performed in half-an-hour, and this is leaving out of consideration the deliberation required for penning the involved replies to my questions. I regret that they are of such a personal nature that I cannot even send you the extracts. My brother's replies covered about thirteen pages; among them were three signed notes from three different spirit friends who had come to him in my house here, or at Detroit, and at the Jonsons' in Toledo'. (Direct-Voice with Mrs Etta Wriedt in Detroit, and Materialisation séances with Mr and Mrs Ben Jonson, Orchard St, Toledo, Ohio).