

History Corner



The Pioneer Who Inspired Emma Hardinge Britten

Emma Frances Jay Bullene

(1832-1915)

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At least two years before Emma Hardinge [Britten] made her debut in America as a Spiritualist lecturer in 1857, and decades before Silver Birch spoke through Maurice Barbanell, Miss Emma Frances Jay had become a sensation as an American trance medium.

How is it that a young lady of only twenty-three summers—of modest mien and retiring habits—whose whole education, except in music, drawing, and other ornamental branches, was acquired in the common schools..., before she was fifteen years old—can stand serene and self-possessed before great multitudes [sometimes more than 1,400 persons], and discuss the most important theological ideas and practical reforms, with so much discrimination, dignity, and power?¹

Emma Hardinge Britten wrote of Emma Frances Jay that she was “a young lady who had quite recently become developed as a trance medium in America, in fact the first phenomenon of this kind that has yet appeared upon a public rostrum. Miss Jay’s Mediumship consisted of speaking with extraordinary eloquence on metaphysical subjects. She also concluded her addresses by singing; both words and music being improvisations of remarkable beauty and sweetness.”² It seems probable, given Britten’s high praise, that Miss Jay was the inspiration for Britten to become a trance speaker.

William Hayden reported in June 1854 on the Massachusetts Spiritual Convention in Boston about hearing a “young lady of very prepossessing appearance, and, if we may be allowed to judge, about twenty years of age, who desired that her name might not be mentioned, as she had *friends* (?) (who has not) who did not like to have her interested in the manner. The Spirit who purported to speak through her gave his name as the great statesman, Daniel Webster.... The speech occupied a full half hour or more, and was attentively listened to by all present.”³ He likely wrote about Emma Frances Jay.

She was described in one newspaper as “of medium size, has a good forehead of the masculine type, wears her hair in corkscrew ringlets, and has a voice of sufficient volume to be heard quite distinctly in all parts of the church. She is a good elocutionist, and her gesticulation is copious, and considering she speaks with her eyes shut, is for the most part, appropriate and in good taste....”⁴

[1] *Spiritual Telegraph*, 10 Mar. 1855, p. 2, GenealogyBank.com

[2] Emma Hardinge Britten, *Nineteenth Century Miracles, or, Spirits and Their Work in Every Country of the Earth A Complete Historical Compendium of the Great Movement Known as “Modern Spiritualism”* (New York: Lovell & Co., 1884), 137.

[3] “The Convention in Boston,” *Spiritual Telegraph*, 24 June 1854, p. 1, and W[illiam] R. H[ayden], “Letter from Boston,” dated 12 July 1854, *Spiritual Telegraph*, 5 Aug. 1854, p. 3, GenealogyBank.com.

[4] “Spiritualism in Washington,” *Evening Star* (Washington, District of Columbia), 4 Apr. 1856, p. 3, Newspapers.com.

Emma Frances Jay was born in 1832 in New York City.⁵ She is probably the eighteen-year-old daughter of Jesse Jay, a trunk maker, and his wife, Sarah (Ketcham) Jay, and sister to sixteen-year-old, Henry N. Jay, all listed in the 1855 New York State Census.⁶

So impressed with this young woman's trance mediumship, when Maria B. Hayden and her husband William planned another trip to England in April 1855, they took along Miss Jay.⁷ The Haydens wanted to introduce her to the English aristocracy. Emma applied for a passport the day before William Hayden did, and her witness was the same as William's, Lewis B. Monroe. She was then age twenty-three with a high forehead, dark hazel eyes, round chin, dark brown hair, dark complexion, and oval face. Unfortunately, there is a smudge in the ink where her height was given.⁸

Emma spent several months among the aristocratic circles of England, and, according to Emma Hardinge Britten, "Miss Jay's interesting phase of Mediumship rendered her the centre of universal admiration."⁹

When Emma Jay was in trance, one American newspaper reported,

her whole appearance and manner [underwent] an evident transformation. She arose, and in a voice different from that in her natural or normal state, answered questions as they were successively presented to her, with an affluence and correctness of language, logic....[that was] truly astonishing. She confined herself with a remarkable continuity to the letter and hearing of the questions, immediately comprehending their scope and object; and, at the conclusion, requested that if they were not answered fully and satisfactorily, any deficiency or obscurity might be pointed out for further elucidation. She states, both in her normal and trance conditions, that Spirits speak through her, as a conditional medium, employing her vocal organs and brain for their utterance; that she has no control over the language or thoughts....¹⁰

[5] An article in the *Spiritual Telegraph* of 10 Mar. 1855, p. 2, says she is "only twenty-three summers," placing her birth year around 1832. On her passport application of 9 Apr. 1855, she reports her birthplace as "Catskile," N.Y., and says she is 23, U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925, image on Ancestry.com. But on the 1855 New York State Census, Kings Co., Brooklyn, Ward 4, e.d. 2, household 918, image on Ancestry.com, she was born in Kings County, which is New York City.

[6] 1855 New York State Census, Kings Co., Brooklyn, Ward 4, e.d. 2, household 918, image on Ancestry.com. Emma Jay is of the right age to be Emma Frances Jay. The mother's maiden name comes from the relationships of Enos and Anna Ketcham also listed on this census.

[7] *Spiritual Telegraph*, 10 Mar. 1855, p. 2, and 31 Mar. 1855, p. 2, GenealogyBank.com; *The Boston Daily Atlas*, 12 March 1855, p. 1, <https://www.gale.com/c/19th-century-us-newspapers>; *Boston Herald*, 10 Mar. 1855, p. 4, and *Springfield [Mass.] Republican*, 10 Mar. 1855, p. 4, GenealogyBank.com.

[8] U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925, image on Ancestry.com; Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, *In Search of Maria B. Hayden: The American Medium Who Brought Spiritualism to the U.K.* (Salt Lake City: Scattered Leaves Press, 2020), 204-5.

[9] Britten, *Nineteenth Century Miracles*, p. 138. Unfortunately, I could find no mention of Emma Frances Jay in the British press.

[10] "Miss Jay's Lectures in Binghamton [New York]," *Spiritual Telegraph* 10 May 1856, p. 6, GenealogyBank.com.

Like Silver Birch through Maurice Barbanell, Miss Jay took questions while in trance, which her often unnamed spirit control answered, although an article in 1882 revealed one control as “Angela the Spirit (an Italian flower girl).”¹¹ Some of her lectures were recorded on a phonograph by T. J. Ellinwood.¹² Here are two questions that were posed, the answers to which are just as relevant today as they were in 1855:¹³

Q: Are spiritual manifestations opposed to our Creator, and are they more beneficial than pulpit instruction?

A: Respecting the effects of Spiritualism, and its superiority over what is termed pulpit preaching, I desire to speak for one moment. Can you trace in the world of nature, or in the revelations given in your Bible, one single evidence of the immortality of the soul that is not spiritual? Do not spiritual manifestations form the basis of every development of religion that has been made? How did Christ receive many of the instructions he gave? Were they not influxes from higher sources than himself, or utterances from Spirits that surrounded him? Are there not repeated evidences of his holding converse with Spirits? Did not Paul, John, and in fact, almost every one of the prophets and apostles, yea, and the patriarchs, receive their instructions from spiritual sources? What is called inspiration is no more nor less than a compliance with the laws and a realization of the results of spiritual converse, and it is through this that you have received every iota of knowledge in relation to the spiritual powers and a future life.

Now, if you have a man to stand in your pulpit and preach to you weekly, he will perhaps, only give you what seems to him to be the true translation of the Scriptures—the revelations of other times. In this case you have the opinion of but one individual, while by resorting to spiritual communications, you may have a living inspiration, and ascertain the opinion of many upon these important subjects, while those who have passed the portals of the tomb must of necessity understand them more perfectly. This is one advantage of Spiritualism over pulpit instruction. You who have been subject all your lives to bondage through fear of death, and who have now become acquainted with this beautiful philosophy of Spiritualism, can testify to its useful effects. Death now presents to you no terrors, no darkness—it is simply a laying aside of the external material form, and the act of entering a more beautifully furnished apartment, to dwell forever in the Paradise of the common Father.

Q: What is spiritual information in regard to endless punishment?

A: Now in relation to...Eternal Punishment—we must consider the nature of the creation, and speak of good and evil. It is to the great First Cause that we must

[11] “Memorial Services,” from the *Cleveland [Ohio] Herald*, reported in *Banner of Light*, 3 June 1882, p. 5, <http://iapsop.com/>.

[12] Truman Jeremiah Ellinwood (1830-1921). He co-authored with Henry Ward Beecher, *A Summer Parish: Sabbath Discourses, And Morning Service Of Prayer, At The “Twin Mountain House,” White Mountains, New Hampshire, During The Summer Of 1874* (New York: J. B. Ford and Co., 1875).

[13] “Miss Jay’s Benefit,” *Spiritual Telegraph*, 17 Mar. 1855, p. 2, GenealogyBank.com.

trace all effects. Your Bible tells you that God created all things, and pronounced them *good*. No one will deny that *eternal punishment* is a dire and positive evil; hence I can not partake of the nature of the Divine Being; and as he created all things that are created, I can not conceive it possible that he could be the author of any such positive antagonism to his own nature. I deny the existence of a positive principle of evil. But you have been taught, you say, that the principle of evil emanated from the rebellion of an angel in heaven, who, being cast out and cursed, came to the earth, and tempted our first parents; that they fell, and thus sin was transmitted to us, and we were made subject to its penalty—to eternal punishment. Think a moment of the inconsistency of this doctrine. Suppose it possible for an angel of heaven that had its birth there, in the presence of pure Being who created him, could become discontented and be led to rebel against God, in consequence of which you affirm that the Creator cast him out of the celestial paradise. Now how is it that this created being possesses the power to create an infinite evil, and to establish an eternal antagonism to his Creator? Do you not thus make him supreme, and the source of a power that controls nine tenths of the whole human family, while God has power to attract to himself only the small portion that remain?...

It is only as man perverts what God has pronounced supremely good, and abuses the powers for good with which he was endowed, that he reaps bitterness the reward of his doings.... Remember that, while you possess [the same] degree of love and kindness for the human family, God is infinitely more pure and loving than you, and that the love embodied in your hearts is but a spark of the unquenchable flame of his Divine Spirit.

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Although the Haydens returned to America in June of 1855, Emma stayed on through the end of October. She wrote from No. 9 Burton Crescent, London, on 21 September 1855, how she missed her friends in America, even though she “found true hearts among the people of France and England.... Kindred souls know no time, space nor separation—no past, no future but the Spirit....” She continued, writing that she “visited Paris, and held converse with the living history of centuries both there and in London.... The progress of *Spiritualism* is less marked in these countries.... As a medium, I have been passive, resisting no opportunity to do what I could for truth.” She concludes by saying she will be back in America by the end of October.¹⁴

Upon her return to the United States, Emma resumed her trance speaking tour in the northeast, followed by traveling in the Midwestern states. The *Spiritual Telegraph* wrote of her in October 1856:

[14] *Spiritual Telegraph*, 13 October 1855, p. 2, GenealogyBank.com.

Miss Jay's reputation as an eloquent Trance-speaking Medium has preceded her...; and it cannot be necessary, in this connection, to commend either the matter or the style of her eloquent disquisitions on the Spiritual Philosophy, and her delicate yet forceful appeals to the understanding and the heart. It may suffice to say, that perhaps no female lecturer in this country has ever called larger audiences together, or given more general satisfaction by her public ministrations.¹⁵

She would speak and sing in trance, impromptu and extemporaneously, for one to two hours.

Presumably during her travels she met, then married, merchant John Bullene Jr. on 5 December 1856 in Lyons, Wisconsin.¹⁶ They had four children: John, born in 1859, Frank, born in 1867,¹⁷ and two daughters, Clara Louise and Lily, one of whom was born after 1859 and died by September 1863.¹⁸ Although the dates of the daughters' births and deaths were not inscribed on their joint headstone, the daughters were buried together in Green Ridge Cemetery, Kenosha, Wisconsin.¹⁹ The headstone was likely placed on the grave after the second daughter died.

Emma's marriage took a toll on her public appearances. In the 2 March 1861 *Banner of Light*, Warren Chase of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, wrote a letter to the editor inquiring about Emma Frances Jay:

"Where is the beautiful messenger to whom the angels whispered words for private and public ear?" and I reply, she is married—not dead, but married, and mortals, not angels are using her now....true, an Emma Hardinge is filling out the circuit which the other Emma begun; but we still feel the loss, and need both, and hundreds more like them, to supply the demand of our world for mediums and spiritual inspiration.... Oh, Emma—Emma! If thou art still on earth with voice or pen, why not let us hear or see occasionally a word from thence?²⁰

She was back on the rostrum by 3 September 1863 when she spoke for the third annual convention of Spiritualists in Oregon, Illinois. "Mrs. Bullene, after an invocation, spoke upon the 'Supremacy of Truth over Error. There is not room to give any of this gifted lady's remarks. All have known Miss Emma Francis Jay in the past. She has been for some years filling the sphere of a devoted wife and mother, and has now for a time returned her [unreadable] born in the lecture field. She is the mother of two children, one a beautiful boy, and the other a cherub girl, now blooming in the beautiful summerland."²¹

[14] *Spiritual Telegraph*, 13 October 1855, p. 2, GenealogyBank.com.

[15] *Spiritual Telegraph*, 4 Oct. 1856, p. 5, GenealogyBank.com.

[16] "Marriage of Miss Jay," *Spiritual Telegraph*, 28 Mar. 1857, p. 7, GenealogyBank.com.

[17] "Baptism on a Railroad Train," *Daily Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), 8 June 1859, p. 8, Newspapers.com; 1870 U.S. federal census, New York, New York City, ward 9, dist. 9, p. 328A ; 1880 U.S. federal census, Emma F. J. Bullene in the household of John Bullene (husband), New York, New York City, e.d. 438, p. 531C.

[18] *Banner of Light*, 3 Oct. 1863, p. 2, <http://iapsop.com/>.

[19] FindAGrave.com, Memorial #94667150.

[20] Warren Chase, "Emma Frances Jay," *Banner of Light*, 2 Mar. 1861, <http://iapsop.com/>.

[21] *Banner of Light*, 3 Oct. 1863, p. 2, <http://iapsop.com/>.

Emma's marriage would have other troubles, however. In an article titled "A Lawyer's Threat of Suicide," on 25 March 1880,

John Bullene, jr. [sic], of No. 345 Fifth-ave., [New York City], was missing from his house last night under circumstances which gave his wife and friends great alarm. Late last evening he sent a note to the house stating that he was about to commit suicide, that he had gone to Fulton Ferry with his pockets full of shot, and that his wife might look for his body in the ferry slip. His wife sent the note to Captain Berghold, of the Twenty-ninth Precinct, and requested that officers might be sent in search of her husband. Detective Schmittberger, of the Precinct, visited Mr. Bullene's house, and got from his wife as much information as possible about her husband's habits. A dispatch was sent to the Police of the Fourth Precinct also asking them to watch Fulton Ferry. In this dispatch Mr. Bullene was described as fifty years old with iron gray hair and whiskers. Nothing was seen of him at the ferry slip, and although several detectives searched for him in various places uptown they were unsuccessful.²²

John Bullene was a salesman connected with the dry goods trade, but by the early 1880s, he devoted himself to the law.²³ As it turned out, John Bullene was also a drinker, sometimes "drinking himself crazy." He had been committed on a charge of insanity to St. Vincent's Hospital in 1880, but escaped. His wife, Emma, who he claimed was a "nervous wife," ran a boarding house where they lived. John said "his wife is jealous of all the lady inmates of the boarding-house, and particularly of one unmarried lady of great personal attractions." The lady in question was Emma's friend and confidant. It was to her that John wrote his suicide note. He did it to "punish" Emma for her jealousy.²⁴

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Two years prior to her husband's suicide incident, Emma's health was not good, which may be the nervousness John Bullene claimed. The *Banner of Light* reported in June 1882 that she had been "absent from the platform about four years, [but] has started on a tour through the West, where, we trust, she may regain health and vigor...."²⁵

By May 1882, she was in Ohio, not only lecturing on "The Ethics of Spiritualism," but she also held "parlor séances during the week days, at which she is particularly interesting, displaying to a wonderful degree her powers as a *Psychometrist*...."²⁶ A few of the other topics she spoke on in that year were "The Science of Mediumship" and "The Spheres."²⁷

[22] "A Lawyer's Threat of Suicide," *New York Tribune*, 25 Mar. 1880, GenealogyBank.com.

[23] "Bullene's Vagaries. An Inebriate Threatens to Commit Suicide but Fails to Execute His Threat," *New York Herald* 26 Mar. 1880, GenealogyBank.com.

[24] "Bullene, Jr.'s, Sad Fate," *New York Times*, 26 Mar. 1880, p. 5.

[25] *Banner of Light*, 24 June 1882, p. 3, <http://iapsop.com/>.

[26] *Banner of Light*, 20 May 1882, p. 12, <http://iapsop.com/>.

[27] *Banner of Light*, 20 May 1882, p. 12; 3 June 1882, p. 5, <http://iapsop.com/>.

She appeared to have first visited Denver, Colorado, as a speaker in July 1882,²⁸ and moved there by April 1884.²⁹ Her husband, John, died on 20 June 1888 in Central City, Colorado, and was buried in Denver's Fairmount Cemetery.³⁰

At a séance held on 2 November 1894, the trance medium Mrs. B. F. Smith received this message for Emma from her husband, John Bullene:

Good morning, Mr. Chairman. [Good morning.] We realize fully, as we come into this Circle-Room, that all are welcome here.

For many years I have been learning little by little of spirit-communion. I have also felt at times unsatisfied with what I received, and a reaching out for more. The spirit of man, whether in the mortal form or in the world beyond is never satisfied, but is ever desirous of obtaining knowledge, "more proof," as our friends in mortal say, and we as immortals also ask for more proof. So you see human nature is the same on both sides of life. Well, that is perfectly right.

I have often heard it asked, "If spirits can tell one thing why can't they tell everything?" I say to you as it has been said to me, "That would be perfection." Dear mortals, be reasonable in your demands; meet your spirit-friends as you would meet them here—that is, in the same attitude of reasonable inquiry, and many of the doubts that now assail you will be removed.

It was a great comfort to me when here to realize that my friends lived, and not only lived, but were near me—I might say in the next room to me—for I sensed their presence so perfectly.

I know Emma understands much in regard to these things, but when the summons shall come to her she will exclaim, "I *thought* I knew a great deal of spirit-communion." So you do, so you have in the past, but you will know more in time to come.

I know whereof I speak, and I would that the whole world might know that Spiritualism is the grandest religion conceivable, for it removes doubts and fears, and establishes a knowledge in their place.

Emma is before the public (on the rostrum) and is well known in Central City, Col. I was also known there. John Bullene.³¹

[28] *Banner of Light*, 1 July 1882, p. 2, <http://iapsop.com/>.

[29] *Banner of Light*, 12 Apr. 1884, p. 8, <http://iapsop.com/>.

[30] *Banner of Light*, 21 July 1888, p. 8, <http://iapsop.com/>; FindAGrave.com, Memorial #91408123. He was buried in Fairmount Cemetery, Denver, Colo., and according to this source, he was born 1 Dec. 1827, Hannibal, Oswego Co., N.Y.

[31] "Spirit-Messages, Given through the Trance Mediumship of Mrs. B. F. Smith. Report of Séance held Nov. 2, 1894. Individual Messages. John Bullene," *Banner of Light*, 15 Dec. 1894, p. 6, <http://iapsop.com/>.

Emma spent the summer of 1895 in California,³² and another six months lecturing in that state in 1896, returning to Denver by 20 June.³³

In June 1898, Emma wrote an article for the fiftieth anniversary of Modern Spiritualism in the *Banner of Light*:

...In 1855, as Emma Frances Jay—now Mrs. Bullene—my public ministry began in New York City, under the kindly auspices of those pioneer champions of our spiritual gospel, whose noble devotion to the then unpopular truth shed upon their names a peerless lustre which can never grow dim. A pioneer trance medium and lecturer, those early years gave to my young life the acquisition of many rare friends at home and abroad, who never faltered their loyalty to Spiritualism and the Harmonial Philosophy.....³⁴

While she paid tribute to the Fox Sisters, interestingly, she does not mention Maria B. Hayden, who helped launch her career.

Emma was instrumental in forming and incorporating a new religious society, the Harmonial Spiritualistic Association of Denver in 1903. "Its objects are educational, ethical and spiritualistic development and advancement to foster the religious principles necessary to mental and spiritual freedom, to build, to print and disseminate literature, to found other societies, train ministers and promulgate the philosophy of life."³⁵

In 1904, Emma wrote an article for the *Denver Post*, explaining how she became interested in what she would term "psychic archaeology":

In the year 1902 I spent several months in New Mexico, investigating the ruins of the Cliff Dwellers, and while in Las Vegas received much courtesy from Prof. E. L. Hewitt, principal of the state normal school, whose fine collection of Cliff Dweller relics was kindly placed at my disposal, for psychometric study.

In the collection of thirty skulls, varying in size, there was one of an adult man of average proportions that gave most remarkable evidence of an advanced civilization of Cliff Dwellers seen in the skull that had been beautifully trephined....

[32] *Banner of Light*, 5 Oct. 1895, p. 7, <http://iapsop.com/>.

[33] *Banner of Light*, 11 April 1896, p. 8, and 20 June 1896, p. 8, <http://iapsop.com/>.

[34] Emma Frances Jay Bullene, "Spiritualist Jubilee Greeting," *Banner of Light*, 18 June 1898, p. 2, <http://iapsop.com/>.

[35] "New Religious Society," *Denver Post*, 2 June 1902, p. 10, GenealogyBank.com.

Some of the specimens of pottery taken from the tombs at that Pueblo are very fine and gave me wonderful psychometric knowledge of peculiar customs of the Cliff people. For example, one large bowl taken from an isolated tomb, apparently the resting place of a distinguished person, which must have measured fifteen inches in diameter; the decorations were unique and on psychometric examination, I found them to be geometric in design. In significance they betrayed the knowledge of astronomy....”³⁶

She did not describe how she worked psychometrically, but it seems she must have been handed objects while her eyes were closed. Otherwise, anyone looking at the bowl would see geometric designs.

Emma wrote about her findings in the 1905 publication of her book, *The Psychic History of the Cliff Dwellers, Their Origin and Destruction*. She discovered that through psychometry, or psychic archaeology, she could ascertain America’s prehistory.³⁷ She claimed that the ancestors of the Pueblo Indians, the Cliff Dwellers, were “of Scandinavian origin, their emigration was due to over-population of home territory. A colony of ten thousand embarked under the care of Norse mariners for homes on the American continent and landed at the St. Lawrence river....” They then continued west to what would become New Mexico and Colorado.³⁸ Unfortunately, her theory has found no later scientific validation; the origin of the Cliff Dwellers and Pueblo Indians is still uncertain. One theory is they “are believed to be the descendants of three major cultures including the Mogollon, Hohokam, and Ancient Puebloans (Anasazi), with their history tracing back for some 7,000 years.”³⁹

Emma Frances Jay Bullene passed into spirit in her eighties in 1915, and was buried in Fairmount Cemetery in Denver, Colorado.⁴⁰

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[36] Emma F. Jay Bullene, “Remarkable Example of Surgical Ingenuity of the Cliff Dwellers,” *Denver Post*, 17 Jul. 1904, p. 35, GenealogyBank.com.

[37] Emma Frances Jay Bullene, *The Psychic History of the Cliff Dwellers, Their Origin and Destruction* (Denver: Reed Publishing Co., 1905).

[38] Full page advertisement and book summary for *The Psychic History of the Cliff Dwellers* by Emma F. Jay Bullene, *The Colorado Medical Journal and Western Medical Surgical Gazette* XII (Feb. 1906): 25.

[39] “Pueblo Indians – Oldest Culture in the U.S.,” Legends of America, <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/na-puebloindians/>.

[40] FindAGrave.com, Memorial #91408121. Someone added a maiden name of “Wright,” but this is incorrect, and it is not carved on her headstone.

It puzzles me why and how a respected and widely known trance medium such as Emma Frances Jay Bullene has been so long overlooked as one of Spiritualism's instrumental pioneers. She clearly made an impression on Emma Hardinge Britten and likely inspired Britten to become a trance medium herself. But it is my privilege as a spirit biographer to have been able to resurrect the life story of Emma Frances Jay Bullene and add her to the annals of Spiritualism's pioneers.



From the desk of

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