

Mary “Polly” (Claflin) (Burns) Sparr¹

Born 6 January 1831 probably in Chapman Township, Snyder County, Pennsylvania.²

Died 16 March 1924 at 341 Hancock Street, Brooklyn, New York.³

Buried Evergreens Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York 19 March 1924.⁴

Mrs. Sparr is the most eccentric and altogether unfortunate organization⁵ in the family. The vices of unheard-of ancestors seem boiled down and concentrated in her person. She is as much inclined to suspicion and hate as the sparks are to fly upward. She has exerted her utmost to prejudice the world against Col. Blood and Victoria. Poor woman! She knows not what she does.⁶

Through the lens of the 21st century, Mary was without a doubt the most colorful of the Claflin children. Her temperament bordered on that of a sociopath; she had little regard for either the truth or for the well-being of others. Like her mother, Mary tended to be a hysteric, often reacting to drama by taking to her bed. While she is difficult to take seriously, her actions could have very serious results when unleashed. Some of her behavior, especially her marriages, may have been driven by a strong instinct for survival.

Third in the birth order, she was the second eldest Claflin child to survive. Born in Pennsylvania before her father moved to Ohio, she made first census appearance by name when she was newly married to Ross Burns, the local sheriff in Mt. Gilead, Ohio.⁷ All of her children fathered by Burns were born in Mt. Gilead.⁸

Shortly around the time of the birth of the couple’s youngest child in February 1858, Burns deserted Mary and ran off to Kansas. Because the only accounts of what happened are a cemetery record and Mary’s later testimony under oath, nothing about Burns’s desertion is clear other than the fact that he did leave and never came back. He left no record of his reasons for doing so. His eminently successful career in Kansas as an

¹ Mary also went by the names Polly and Molly.

² Wight, Charles, *The Genealogy of the Claflin Family*, New York: Press of William Green, 1903, p. 125 for the date. The 1831 US Federal Census of Chapman Township, Snyder County, Pennsylvania show Buck living with a male roughly his own age, two women between 20 and 30 years of age and one girl under the age of five. It is known that Buck lived with his brother at this time. Presumably, the child is Mary’s elder sister, Margaret. Given that Mary was born in January of the following year, she was probably born in Chapman Township.

³ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 18 March 1924.

⁴ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 19 March 1924.

⁵ “Organization” as used by Spiritualists refers to the archaic usage in of how the elements of a person’s physical, emotional, and spiritual make-up are arranged to create the individual.

⁶ E. Whipple, “Death in ‘Our Household,’” *Woodhull & Claflin’s Weekly*, v. 6, no. 8, 26 July 1873.

⁷ 1850 US Census, Mt. Gilead Township, Ohio. 3 September 1850. He was listed as the sheriff, age 25, she was 20. The couple had married in Mt. Gilead on 5 February 1850.

⁸ The couple’s eldest child, Zilpha Ann, died in November 1866 in St. Louis and was interred in Cincinnati on 30 November 1866 as Silpha Ann Johnson, daughter of Mary and Ross Burns. At the time, her age was given as 17, so born in 1849. While it is possible she was an illegitimate daughter of Mary’s, the more likely explanation is Zilpha had married a man by the name of Johnson, and her age at death was Mary’s approximation. Zilpha is not recorded on the 1850 census with the couple, suggesting she had not yet been born.

attorney suggests that he simply found Mary too difficult to live with. Mary's later testimonies about the marriage do stand, however, as a good illustration of her willingness to twist facts to suit her story, even if she was committing perjury or some other offense. On one occasion, under oath, Mary claimed that Ross had run off with another woman; that she tried to follow him, but was deterred by Indian attacks, which resulted in the deaths of two of her children.⁹ In another account, also under oath, she said she made it as far as Linn, Kansas, but that Burns left in the night with his new paramour. Mary later claimed that the eldest surviving son, Milton, was taken by his father when he left Mt. Gilead, but she "stole him back" and won custody.¹⁰ Her most laughable explanation came when Mary swore under oath that she and her father did try to contact Burns, but gave up when "the John Brown troubles" interrupted communication, so she assumed he was dead.¹¹ The "John Brown troubles" in Kansas occurred in 1856 – two years before Mary the birth of the couple's youngest son. Regardless of the details, however, the facts remain that Burns did desert her and the children, did go to Kansas, and made a life for himself there without Mary, leaving her with four young children. Neither Ross nor Mary filed for or obtained a divorce, although her 1860 residence in Indiana may represent an effort on her part to legalize her situation.¹² Compared to the restrictive divorce laws in other states, at the time Indiana was well known to have a relatively liberal approach.¹³ Given the 19th century difficulties faced by abandoned women – very few opportunities were available to support themselves or their children – that she was in Indiana in 1860 while her family was in Cincinnati makes an attempt to obtain a divorce seem reasonable.

With three remaining children to support, Mary gave up her quest for a legal separation from Burns and bigamously married Benjamin Franklin Sparr on 18 December 1860 in Hamilton County, Ohio.¹⁴ Once the couple were married, her new husband—taking a cue from Mary's sister Tennessee "The Wonderful Child"—abandoned his vocation as a carpenter and river flat boatman and became a magnetic "doctor." For the next ten years, the couple wandered to St. Louis and Detroit and points in between. Mary also became a magnetic healer and soon was calling herself "Mrs. Dr. Sparr." The couple's eldest son was born in Detroit in 1863 and the youngest in Chicago in 1868.

In the spring of 1866, while in St. Louis, "Dr." B.F. Sparr got wind of his sister-in-law's irregular 1865 marriage to Colonel James H. Blood. The latter was well-known

⁹ The truth was that she lost only one child during this time, her youngest, and that child died at age two of tuberculosis in Indianapolis. The body was taken to Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati, where he was buried on 17 June 1860, the interment ordered by "Mrs. Mary Burns." (Spring Grove Interment Records, #8636.)

¹⁰ "Old Crimes Recalled," *The New York Times*, 26 October 1886; "Known by Two Names," *New York Daily Tribune*, 26 October 1886.

¹¹ "Tennie C. Claflin and Poverty," *New York Daily Tribune*, 27 October 1886, p.2, col. 5.

¹² See Norma Basch, *Framing American Divorce From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 68ff; also "Relief in the Premises: Divorce as a Woman's Remedy in New York and Indiana, 1815-1870," *Law and History Review* 8:1 (Spring 1990), pp. 1-24. See also Hendrik Hartog, "Marital Exits and Marital Expectations in Nineteenth Century America," *Georgetown Law Journal* 80 (1991).

¹³ Basch, "Relief in the Premises," op cit., and Richard Wiles, *The Divorce Issue and Reform in Nineteenth-Century Indiana*, Muncie, Ball State University, 1976.

¹⁴ Marriage Returns, Hamilton County, Ohio, #607. The marriage probably happened in Cincinnati, where Mary's parents and younger brother, Malden, were living.

in St. Louis due to his positions as City Auditor, president of a local railroad, Civil War hero, and colonel in the local militia. He was also living a double life as a magnetic healer under the alias of “Prof. J.A. Harvey.” Sparr, aware of Blood’s alter-ego, plotted to blackmail Blood based on his then-bigamous marriage.¹⁵ Blood had much to lose through public exposure of his secrets and Sparr was right: the marriage was not legal. Blood was not legally divorced by his first wife until July 1866. Under-estimating Blood, Sparr threatened to ruin the Colonel’s reputation if he was not paid a large sum of money to be quiet – a “crime” that actually wasn’t a criminal offense at the time.¹⁶ However, by the time Sparr was ready to unleash his plot, Blood had taken matters into his own hands. In June 1866, he settled his affairs with the City of St. Louis (his accounts were reported to be “all square in every particular”) and left the city for parts unknown, leaving behind lurid accounts in the St. Louis papers.¹⁷ His first wife divorced him in July,¹⁸ and Blood exchanged vows with Victoria Woodhull the second time in Dayton a few days later.¹⁹ Sparr could no longer damage Blood’s reputation and respectability as the news of Blood’s messy desertion of his first wife and affair with Victoria made national news.²⁰ Sparr would try again a few years later.

Blood and Woodhull, probably as a statement in support of their theories of ‘free love,’ divorced in February 1868,²¹ creating an ambiguity regarding their marriage that followed them for years. The couple continued to live together despite the divorce, and to confuse matters further, frequently gave room and board to Victoria’s first husband, Dr. Canning Woodhull. By 1868, Canning was a fixture in their household, either when he

¹⁵ “Affidavit of Mrs. Margaret A. Miles, Sister of Mrs. Woodhull,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 8 May 1871, p. 10: On or about May 15, 1866, I being a resident of Cincinnati, was approached by my sister, Mary F. Sparr, the wife of B.F. Sparr, of St. Louis. She said, “Margaret, we are going to make a big raise, and I’ll tell you if you’ll not let it out. Blood (referring to Col. J.H. Blood, of St. Louis) has got plenty of money, and we are bound to get some of it. Sparr and Captain (I forget his name) are going to arrest him for bigamy, and get \$10,000 or \$15,000 for letting him off, which we will divide” I said, “Molly, I wouldn’t do it.” She said, “Sparr is bound to it and I can’t stop it.” In October following, being in St. Louis, Sparr said to me, “Capt. Loring wrote a letter to Col. Blood about that affair I let Victoria have it (the letter) and she wouldn’t give it to me again. I want you to get it from the Colonel and send it to me He appeared very anxious about it.” Margaret Ann Miles.

Sworn, &c., before me, July 10, 1868, B. Harry Hammer, N.P., Chicago.

If Sparr knew of his own wife’s bigamy, he did not let on.

¹⁶ See “The Unmanly Fear: Extortion Before the Twentieth Century,” *Law, Crime and History* 2 (2013). Sparr was banking on Blood’s possible fear of exposure as leverage, knowing that Blood had no legal recourse.

¹⁷ “Sudden Departure of the City Auditor for South America--Romantic Incidents Connected Therewith,” *Daily Missouri Republican*, 25 June 1866. Also 26 June 1866, *St. Louis Democrat*.

¹⁸ “Recorder’s Court,” *Chicago Tribune*, 10 July 1866, p. 3, col. 2.

¹⁹ Montgomery County, Ohio, Marriage Returns, 14 July 1866, page 518, number 439.

²⁰ “Strange Revelations, A St. Louis Official of the Radical School Converted to Spiritualism—Is Enchanted by a Clairvoyant Siren—Squanders His Fortune—Takes Three or Four Wives—Leaves for South America,” *The New York Times*, 4 July 1866.

²¹ “Recorder’s Court,” Chicago Tribune, 10 February 1868

Victoria C. Blood vs. James H. Blood. Bill for divorce on the grounds of adultery. Filed on the 6th instant, and referred on a written appearance by defendant on the same day. The main witness to the case was Bernard [sic] Claflin, the father of complainant. *The complaint is taking her decree asked, however, to retain her maiden name of Woodhull.*

needed to recover from a severe bender, or, when sober, because of his care of her children, particularly her handicapped son.²²

In late 1868, Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin were in New York City running a “Magnetic Healing Institute,” out of their home on Great Jones Street.²³ Always on the lookout for publicity, the two sisters spoke to the press (*italics inserted for emphasis*):

This institution is upon a magnificent scale. It is at No. 17 Great Jones Street, and presided over by *one surgeon, two physicians, and two sisters*, who are the professors of the above mentioned science. . . We have seen one of the clairvoyants, and she is beautiful enough to cure anybody. She is young and childish in her manners, with Titian hair, which falls in rich masses about her head, blue eyes which wear an honest steadfast look, a symmetrical figure which is costumed in excellent taste and a pretty hand which sparkles with gems. . . This lady’s name is Miss Tennessee Claflin . . . The other lady is said to be quite as charming as Miss Tennessee, *and is her sister and the wife of the presiding physician, whose name is Dr. C. H. Woodhull.*²⁴

It did not take long for the Sparr family to show up on their doorstep, though it is not clear if Benjamin Sparr knew of the true relationship between Victoria and her two spouses.

“When we came to New York, we took a house in Great Jones street, and leased it for a long term. Colonel, Vic and I expected to live alone there, and then I determined to take my mother with me. Then the Sparrs and the Mileses, and all twenty-five relations came. They did not live peaceably with us. . . I told them to go. They wouldn’t. They said if I tried to put them out they would make it hot for us in the papers. I went down to Judge Dowling. Says I: Judge, I want to dispossess two families out of my house. He said: If it was one man, an officer could chuck him over his shoulder; but two whole families make it different. He sent an officer who told them to clear. They told him to clear, else they would throw him out of the window. The officer returned and told Dowling that Sparr had the face of a murderer.”²⁵

²² No record of a divorce from Canning Woodhull exists, and later comments by Victoria suggest that the couple merely had an agreement to separate and go their own way. When he died, Victoria only said that they had agreed to separate because of his intemperance, *Woodhull & Claflin’s Weekly*, 27 April 1872. “When he found us inexorable in the determination to separate from him, he made no objection. He permitted us to depart in peace, and never from that day did he either upbraid or complain of us; but on the contrary often wondered that we had not left him before.”

²³ Advertisement, *Brooklyn Eagle*, 1 December 1868; New York City Directories, 1868, 1869 where Victoria and Tennessee are listed as physicians at the Jones Street address. With them were Victoria’s first husband Canning Woodhull, her second, Col. Blood, and the sisters’ parents.

²⁴ “Magnetic Healing Institute and Conservatory of Mental and Spiritual Science,” *Buffalo Daily Courier*, 14 December 1868, p. 1. The “one surgeon” can be identified as Canning Woodhull, the two physicians are likely J.H. Blood and Margaret Claflin Miles, their eldest sister, who, for a number of years previously had worked for Tennessee in previous incarnations of the Magnetic Healing Institute in Cincinnati and Chicago. Margaret had divorced her husband, Enos Miles, a year before.

²⁵ Tennessee Claflin, *Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 May 1871, p. 10.

Tennie eventually managed to remove the Sparrs and all the other hangers-on by giving up the lease on the house, forcing the landlord to evict all of them. Victoria, Tennessee and the Colonel, with the women's parents, moved to the famous Murray Hill mansion at 15 East 38th Street. With their more troublesome relatives temporarily gone, Victoria and Tennie were free to move forward with their own plans of opening a brokerage house and, eventually, their weekly newspaper. They left the family business of quack healing for good. The Magnetic Healing Institute at Great Jones Street was no more. Victoria and Tennie became the "Bewitching Brokers of Wall Street," leaving Mary and Sparr to labor at their branch office in Brooklyn, laying hands on the gullible.²⁶ Tennessee, in an effort to put distance between her businesses and the Sparrs even gave them money to "go west and set up business."²⁷ In late 1869 they did go, and were gone long enough to be recorded in St. Louis in the 1870 census.²⁸ But the lure of luxury was too strong and by December the Sparrs had again moved in with Victoria and Tennie in their Murray Hill Mansion.²⁹ Once again, Tennie was forced to eject them from the household, which she did on April 1, 1871. Calling them "deadbeats," Tennie arranged for her landlord to pen letters of ejection for everyone, but privately made arrangements for herself, Victoria, Col. Blood and her father to return.³⁰ Her mother was installed in the fashionable Washington Hotel, and shortly after the Sparrs and the other relatives were living with her, all on Tennessee's bill.

Again, Benjamin Sparr had an opportunity for extortion. The instability of Mary's mother, Anna, has been well documented both in the press of the day and in modern commentary. Egged on by the Sparrs, Anna blamed her family's downward fiscal spiral on her famous daughters and their "free love" associates, most notably Col. Blood and the radical philosopher Stephen Pearl Andrews. The latter was, at the time, living at the sisters' Murray Hill mansion. Like Mary and her husband, Anna did not understand that the heyday of magnetic healing was over as the science of medicine grew more exact and the horrors of the Civil War faded. With the growing public perception that 'magnetic healing' was quackery, business opportunities were drying up, and such 'healers' were increasingly under scrutiny by local authorities. For the Sparrs, a lack of business meant either returning to be a low-paid boatman on the Ohio rivers, or find another way to make money. They chose extortion.

Colonel Blood, until he was divorced by Victoria in 1876,³¹ bore the brunt of Anna's blame for the downward mobility primarily because her extreme evangelical

²⁶ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 14 May 1869 and 26 May 1869. Ironically, in these two advertisements, two weeks apart, the address of the "Institute" changed.

²⁷ "Female Financiers' Feuds," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 May 1871, p. 10.

²⁸ *Leavenworth (KS) Times*, 4 September 1869 and 3 October 1869. "Dr B.F. Sparr and Mrs. Sparr, the celebrated magnetic doctress will remain at the European Hotel until further notice. The afflicted find in both a friend, and the cures that are effected are astonishing. In these days of quackery it is a pleasure to meet such skilled practitioners as Dr. Sparr and Mrs. Sparr, the magnetic doctress, and the sick should call and consult them." Also, 1870 US Federal Census of St. Louis, St. Louis County, Missouri, 2 July 1870, p. 109, lines 17-23. Sparr declared \$500 in personal estate; Mary's eldest son, Milton, was not with the family but in New York with his aunts and Colonel Blood.

²⁹ The household was enumerated twice, once in September and once on 20 December and the Sparrs are shown on the second enumeration. US Federal Census of New York, New York, p. 22, lines 31-34.

³⁰ "Female Financiers' Feuds," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 May 1871, p. 10.

³¹ Though the couple had divorced in Chicago in 1868 and it is not clear if they ever did remarry. In 1871, the documentation of their marriage that was admitted in court was that of the 1866 Dayton ceremony. The

spiritualism could not accept his radical philosophies of free love and individual sovereignty. In her mind, she viewed Blood as Satan himself and a corrupting influence on the “purity and goodness” of her daughters.³²

In May 1871 the Sparrs convinced Mrs. Claflin to bring charges against Blood, “alias Dr. J.A. Harvey,” for assault and the alienation of affection of her daughters. On May 5th, Mary Sparr and Benjamin F. Sparr filed affidavits outlining their complaints against Blood. Anna Claflin filed her own. Sparr went a step further by alleging that “he was engaged in the same bank, as it is called, of Woodhull, Claflin & Co., and knows that it is a fraud upon the public, and he further says that he is well satisfied from what he knows of the same James H. Blood, that he is a man of low and contemptible character.”³³ No record exists of Sparr ever being engaged by Woodhull, Claflin & Co., and as for Blood being a man of low character, Sparr was clearly indulging in psychological transference.³⁴

The judge offered to throw the case out for lack of grounds (“the worst thing specifically charged against you is living with your wife, and not agreeing with your mother-in-law”),³⁵ but Col. Blood wanted to air the matter and be done with it. “I am glad of the opportunity thus afforded of forever putting an end to *this man’s* calumnies and threats.”³⁶

Unfortunately, the trail did not put an immediate end to “this man’s calumnies” (that would come in a few weeks’ time) but the damage to the defendants’ public reputations was devastating. As one reporter phrased it: “The outer world, which has been long suffering to know something of the antecedents of this house [referring to Woodhull, Claflin & Co.] in its individual relations to society. . . are now on the verge of being abundantly, not to say disgustingly gratified.”³⁷ The main damage lay in Blood’s testimony that he did not know if Victoria was divorced from her first husband when he married her, that he and Victoria had divorced in 1868 but continued to live together, and finally that Canning Woodhull continued to live with them. When asked if “you and Mrs. Woodhull and Dr. Woodhull occupy the same room” Blood refused to answer.³⁸

Anna accused Blood of conspiring with her daughters to have her locked up in a lunatic asylum. “Only for my son-in-law, Dr. Sparr, and my daughter, I should certainly now be on Blackwell’s Island. So help me God, I would, or be secreted somewhere.”³⁹ She probably should have said nothing, as it is probable that Benjamin Sparr acted on her comments a few days later.

couple continued to live together as husband and wife and were publicly known as such. They finally separated in the fall of 1875; Victoria filed for and was granted a divorce in 1876.

³² See reporter’s account “The Claflin Clan,” *The New York Herald*, 8 June 1871, p. 6, col. 4.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Nearly every description of James Blood described him as a kind man possessing great integrity and intelligence.

³⁵ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 May 1871, p. 10.

³⁶ *New York Clipper*, 13 May 1871, p. 4. Italics inserted for emphasis.

³⁷ “Female Financiers’ Feuds,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 May 1871, p. 10.

³⁸ “Blood, Woodhull, Claflin,” *New York Herald*, 16 May 1871, p. 3, col. 5.

³⁹ “Claflin Family History,” *Mineral Point Tribune*, 1 June 1871.



Tennessee Claflin (L) and Mary Sparr (R) fighting over their mother, Anna Claflin (C) in the courtroom, 3 June 1871 *The Day's Doings*.

One thing that did come out in the press reports surrounding the trial was that the Sparrs were guilty of using Anna's mental condition to accomplish their own ends and were blackmailing "every prominent person with whom we are acquainted," or so Tennessee told a reporter.⁴⁰ With business prospects and personal funds drying up, the Sparrs were seemingly becoming desperate, so desperate that, within a few weeks, B.F. Sparr would find it necessary to travel to Cincinnati to ask his sister for money. His attempts at extorting the sisters' friends seem to have been both unsophisticated and unsuccessful as he quickly learned that his victims were some of the most sophisticated and unscrupulous gamblers in the nation: they were the sisters' wealthy Wall Street friends:

Dear Sir: Your intimacy with Tennie C. Claflin and with Mrs. Woodhull is known. I know also that you have a wife and family. Now I am down on my luck, and I want \$300 out of you. You may call this blackmailing, But I have you tight, and you will please hand over the amount.⁴¹

One of those who received one of the notorious letters wrote Tennessee:

My Dear Miss Claflin:

A pirate has just left this letter with me and he went away without saying a word. He won't strike me worth a cent. But yesterday I received another in the same way, and an old woman came in who said she was your mother. I believe from what she said that she was crazy. She said that she had been told to get \$300 out of me for that letter, but as she couldn't read, I believed

⁴⁰ "Female Financiers' Feuds, *Brooklyn Eagle*, op cit.

⁴¹ Ibid.

that she did not know what she had been put up to. I told her it was no use. That my intimacy with you was honest, square and pure and that all I knew of you was that you were a woman who honestly earned your own living.

I gave her three dollars because she said she hadn't eaten anything since yesterday morning, and that she hadn't a cent. I asked her why she didn't go to you. She said *Sparr told her that if she did you would send her to the Island*. I write this to you to put you on your guard, because *the parties behind your mother mean you harm*.⁴²

The judge's opinion was that the plaintiffs' evidence did not establish the charges, and he dismissed the case.⁴³ As to Sparr's extortion plots, neither he nor his wife, nor his mother-in-law were charged. Extortion and blackmail were not yet recognized as a crime.⁴⁴

The Sparrs' desperation grew.

Within days of the judge's decision Anna Claflin disappeared. Despite efforts to find her, she was missing for days. While she was gone her daughter Utica told the press that she "apprehends foul work, as she *has heard it said that the old lady's work was done, and the sooner she was out of the way the better*."⁴⁵ Then, Anna turned up at her lodgings in the Washington Hotel at 2 a.m. on the May 26, hysterically telling wild tales about her abduction and imprisonment in a windowless room with only a slice of bread a day to eat. As Anna took to her bed, her daughters Utica and Mary spoke to journalists.

The press, and the more grounded members of the family, questioned the whole event. "There is a tinge of romance about the story of Mrs. Claflin's abduction and incarceration in a private insane asylum which throws doubt on it. That the lady suddenly disappeared and was absent for three or four days is certain; that she may have been seized in the streets and conveyed away by force is not improbable; but that she should have escaped so easily is, to say the least, a little marvelous."⁴⁶ Anna told anyone who would listen that she had talked herself out of her imprisonment.

A few days later, the family's grim private drama again boiled over into the papers. On June 7, Benjamin Franklin Sparr was found dead in French's Hotel in New York. The circumstances were certainly odd. According to testimony at the inquest, Sparr had gone to Hamilton County, Ohio, (the story varies according to account) to visit an invalid sister or to ask the sick sister for money. Why he chose that particular time to leave New York is anybody's guess, and why he checked into French's Hotel, in the 'newspaper quarter' of New York instead of simply going home is equally odd. He did telegraph his wife from Cincinnati to say that he was on his way home, but his detour to the hotel has never been explained. Nor was the fact that, as one of the literate members

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ *The New York Times*, 21 May 1871.

⁴⁴ See Joseph S. Bonica, "The Unmanly Fear: Extortion Before the Twentieth Century," *Law, Crime and History* 2 (2013) and Angus McLaren, *Sexual Blackmail: A Modern History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) for more discussion of the legal status of blackmail and extortion at the time.

⁴⁵ "Mrs. Claflin Missing," *The Sun*, 25 May 1871, p. 1. Italics for emphasis.

⁴⁶ *New York Tribune*, 27 May 1871, p. 4. Myra MacPherson, author of *The Scarlet Sisters*, believes that Anna staged the events. (Private conversation, 19 April 2018).

of the family, he signed the hotel register as “Frank Spohor,” while his customary signature was “B.F. Sparr.”⁴⁷

Benjamin Sparr had died sometime on the sixth; his naked or nearly naked body was found the next day by a hotel maid, his head having hit the door of his room so hard that the panels were pushed out. Investigators had to climb into the room through the transom. The body was taken to the morgue for autopsy. The coroner’s ruling of “natural causes,” caused a firestorm from Sparr’s widow as she took to her bed, prostrate with grief. Interestingly, in one of the last times he supported anything his mother said, Milton J. Burns claimed that the body was found reeking of carbolic acid and that he agreed with the press that the signature in the register not Sparr’s.⁴⁸ Worse for Mary’s frame of mind, she did not learn of her husband’s death until a day after he was found, and then from a reporter. Her reaction was to have his personal effects searched and, not finding what she was expecting, claimed he had been robbed of a large amount of money.⁴⁹

Among other items found was a copy of the eviction notice from the landlord of 15 East 38th Street and a letter, written by Buck Claflin, supposedly to his daughter Tennie:⁵⁰

I have written several times and tried to explain my view and feelings to you about Pa and Polly,⁵¹ and that the sooner they were in a house by themselves the better it would be for you and poor old mother. I suppose you have done all, and as fast as you could. Pa and Polly says that they are not going out, and that you have not put them out. *They are fearful, and you well know it.* You can give me any version of the matter and your views with it, and all will be right with me. I will just say you had better tell the owner of the house all about them, and you want to get them out without any trouble or with as little as possible, and get him to come here during the day and tell them he has again been put in possession of this house and all that you own in it, to secure the payment of the rent, and it must be cleared of all the occupants and their effects before Saturday morning, as he is a-going to put other parties in.

Pack up your trunks and lock and fix them to leave and get them down into the hall. Tell Dan to fetch his trunk down, and Milton can take his out also, and if Pa and Polly⁵² wants to get their things out they had better be at it, or they may have some trouble to get them after other parties get into possession. Tell the cook to come down to the bank and get her money, and Mary too,⁵³ and then you can say what you please to them.

⁴⁷ “The Claflin Clan,” *The New York Herald*, 8 June 1871, p 6, col. 4, “The Sensation Family,” *Evening State Journal*, 10 June 1871; “Was There Foul Play?” *Buffalo Commercial*, 16 June 1861; “The Woodhull-Claflin Scandal,” *The New York Times*, 8 June 1871.

⁴⁸ “Was There Foul Play?” *The Buffalo Commercial*, 16 June 1871, p 2, reprinting from the *N.Y. Commercial Advertiser* of June 15. The reporter from the Advertiser had viewed the Hotel register, and interviewed Milton Burns as well as Mary.

⁴⁹ He may have indeed gone to see his sister to ask for money. Mary’s panic at the time, as well as events leading up to his death, suggest he did.

⁵⁰ In all accounts of Sparr’s death, including Tennessee’s, the letter was identified as to Tennessee; however, it reads as if it was written to Victoria.

⁵¹ B.F. Sparr and Mary.

⁵² B.F. Sparr and Mary.

⁵³ Though Mary was paid a small stipend by her sisters for help with household chores, Buck’s use of the name here suggests this was a servant and not his daughter.

You must be resolute and determined in all you say and do. You can talk as mild as you may please to us and Polly, and perhaps it would be best to do so, *for all he wants is to get up a fuse so that he can blackguard you and the house.* Take Byron to the bank or let him stop with me or Margaret. Don't let him come here at all; Polly and mother will pick her badly. Don't let Tenny give her mother a cent to live on. Pa and Polly has plenty, and will not let her suffer.

Don't fail to have the owner take charge, and tell them what they have got to do, or he will sell all their things out.⁵⁴

Despite Buck's statement that she had 'plenty of money,' it seems that she did not. Mary could not afford her husband's funeral expenses. In desperation, she offered the undertaker her piano as collateral, but he refused. Mary's brother-in-law, Thomas Brooker, finally stepped in, identified the body, gave sworn testimony at the inquest, and took care of the deceased's remains. Sparr was said to have been buried in Green-wood cemetery, but there is no record of interment.⁵⁵

Did Sparr, with accomplices, stage Annie's kidnapping in order to frame Col. Blood? Annie and Mary said Blood was behind it, but in fact was it Sparr? After all, Mary and Sparr acted in collusion with Mary during the recent trial. An act like this was certainly typical of his past attempts to defame and discredit Blood. Sparr would have had an alibi if he was not present in the City when the 'kidnapping' took place. Sparr had been pursuing Blood's money and reputation for six years. The fact that Victoria and Tennie had evicted the Sparrs from the Murray Hill mansion a month before did nothing to help matters. Finally, evidence suggests a growing desperation for money on Sparr's part in the weeks before his death. However, the death was ruled natural causes,⁵⁶ and despite the apparent violence, the head wound was attributed to his falling while in fatal distress. No mention was made of either the irregular signature or the aroma of carbolic acid.

The grieving widow told a reporter from the New York *Star* that she had been unjustly treated by the newspapers of the city, that the reporters ignored what she had to say in favor of statements by Victoria, Tennie and Col. Blood. "I wish to say and have it made public, that here on my sick bed I proclaim that my husband's blood is on the heads of those people. He was a man noble by nature, in disposition sensitive. He hated public scandal. They abused and belied him in the public press, they fastened foul calumnies upon his name and they hounded him to death."⁵⁷

Mrs. Dr. Sparr now believed herself to be a widow, and no one else in the family particularly seemed to care that one Dr. Benjamin Franklin Sparr was dead and gone. While Blood, Victoria, and Tennessee certainly had the means to bribe the coroner not to

⁵⁴ "The Dead Doctor Sparr," *The Sun*, 9 June 1871, p. 1. The reporter admitted to stealing the note from Sparr's effects. Italics for emphasis.

⁵⁵ "Was There Foul Play?" *The Buffalo Commercial*, 16 June 1871, p 2, reprinting from the *N.Y. Commercial Advertiser* of June 15. It should be noted that Green-wood Cemetery is in the process of entering their burial records into a database that is available for searching online at https://www.green-wood.com/burial_search/ Private inquiries may be made from the website if a person is believed to have buried there.

⁵⁶ Pulmonary apoplexy, or a violent bleeding in the lungs, which can be caused by heart disease, lung disease, or tuberculosis and, it should be noted, the inhalation of carbolic acid.

⁵⁷ "The Claflin Clan," *Daily Alta California and San Francisco Times*, 21 June 1871, quoting the printed version of the *New York Star*, 10 June 1871.

rule the death suspicious or a homicide, too much time has gone by for anything but speculation.

About a year after Sparr's death, *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly* received a subscription from none other than Ross Burns, now a well-respected attorney in Topeka, Kansas. Mary was told but – in a rare prudent moment – decided to let it go.⁵⁸

Except for her mother, Mary's relationship with her family grew increasingly strained. The press often referred to the siblings' relationship as a "deadly feud." Victoria and Tennessee had little to do with her; Margaret was merely tolerant. When Victoria's first husband Canning Woodhull died in 1872, Mary intimated to the coroner's office that Woodhull's death was suspicious and needed investigation, perhaps in revenge for how her late husband's death had been treated. When the authorities went to investigate, they were met by a vocal and determined Margaret Miles instead. Margaret denounced her sisters Mary and Utica saying "one end of the family was trying to eat up the other."⁵⁹ She went on to say that if her own mother became ill in her house she would not allow her to remain in her house for \$50,000, that she would instead send Anna to either Utica or Mary in the event they could not charge her with poisoning the old lady.⁶⁰

When Utica died in July 1873, Mary was not at the funeral.⁶¹

A month after Utica's death, Mary went to a Spiritualist meeting with her mother. The latter spoke and was so disconnected and wild in her delivery (most of which was spleen directed at Col. Blood and had nothing to do with the meeting) that she was ejected. Mistaken in the press for her sister Margaret Miles, Mary picked up where her mother left off "laboring under very great excitement, and her face flushed with anger. . . she launched out into a tirade of abuse that was more energetic than decent."⁶² She was also ejected from the meeting. Margaret Miles promptly published a notice in the *Herald* that it was not she who was at the meeting, identifying Mary as the person who had been there.⁶³

After Sparr's death, Mary resumed her magnetic healing practice, then augmented her income by running a boarding house. Every few years she was again in the papers, suing one of her tenants for one perceived transgression or another. She never seemed to be able to stay on top of her financial affairs. She moved every year until 1883 when she finally settled down for a time at 53 St. John's Place in Brooklyn.⁶⁴

Mary traveled to Europe on three occasions after Victoria and Tennessee left the United States. The first trip, in 1887, was aboard the *Adriatic* and may have been paid for by Tennie, who had by then become Lady Cook, Viscountess of Montserrat. Buck died in 1885 at which time Victoria sent her mother to live with Tennessee. Sir Francis Cook, who apparently was unwilling to put up with Anna, paid Mary \$5000 to take her to Brooklyn, which was done in February 1888. Unlike Lady Cook and Victoria, Mary traveled in second class, accompanied by her sons. She went again in September 1905, this time with son Frank, and August 1906, traveling alone.

⁵⁸ "Rosa Burns, A Wealthy Young Lady's Death in New York, *Brooklyn Eagle*, 4 September 1883.

⁵⁹ "Excitement in the Woodhull Mansion," *New York Herald*, 9 April 1872, p. 8, col. 5.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ "A Peculiar Funeral," *The Sun* (NY), 14 July 1873, p. 1, col. 4.

⁶² "Spicy Spiritualism," *Harrisburg Telegraph*, 19 August 1873, p. 2, reprinting from the (NY) *Herald* 18 August 1873.

⁶³ "The Sunday Night Spiritualists' Row," *New York Herald*, 19 August 1873.

⁶⁴ See the city directories of New York, 1871-1883, and Brooklyn 1883-1886.

All but one of Mary's surviving children moved away. Milton Burns became an artist went to New Jersey. Daughter Rosa Burns, estranged from her mother, refused any contact, living in the household of a senior consular official from Spain. Youngest son, Millard Sparr, was taken under Lady Cook's wing and educated in England, spending little time in the U.S., finally becoming Tennie's trusted private secretary. Only Benjamin Franklin Sparr, junior (known as Frank), Mary's eldest son from her second marriage, continued to live with his mother as he wandered from job to job, even after what was an apparently brief marriage in January 1891.⁶⁵

In 1883, Mary's world came crashing down once again; and it is telling of her character that once again she only focused on opportunity for her own personal gain. Rosa Burns, Mary's only surviving daughter, died on the 19th of August. The death notice was telling:

BURNS—On Sunday, Aug. 19, after a lingering illness, Rosa V., daughter of the late Hon. Ross Burns of Topeka, Kan., in the 28th year of her age.

Funeral services at the Church of the Nativity on Wednesday morning, 22nd inst.

Topeka (Kan.) and Galion (Ohio) papers please copy.⁶⁶

Mary did not learn of her daughter's death until "she had been two weeks buried in the vault of the Church of the Nativity at Second avenue and East Tenth street."⁶⁷ Worse, she found out about it because she had sent her son Frank to his half-sister's residence

"for the purpose of making arrangements to get her to go to Kansas to attend to some legal proceedings there. He [Frank Sparr] was astonished and horrified to learn that the young woman was buried, and when he conveyed the news to his mother Mrs. Sparr became almost frantic with grief."⁶⁸

As was always true with Mary, there was more to the story and a financial cause for her grief. Long estranged from Mary, Rosa had been welcomed into the home of Fernando de Francisco Martin, the Chancellor to the Spanish Embassy, where she lived for several years, including during the time of her last illness.

Mary's hysterics and cries of foul play finally caused the coroner to exhume the body. Mary insisted that de Martin had violated her daughter and the cause of death was childbirth; she was wrong – the autopsy showed the cause was abdominal cancer. In the coroner's inquest it was shown that Rosa had been ill for two years and had been cared for by de Martin and his daughter, also called Rosa, as well as several highly respected doctors. In court testimony, it eventually came out that Rosa, while still in Mary's care, had been married at a young age to a man who turned out to be a bigamist and she had a

⁶⁵ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 19 June 1895, p. 4.

⁶⁶ "Miss Rosa Burns's Death," *The Sun* (New York), 4 September 1883, p. 1, col. 1. Topeka was the home of Rosa's father's surviving family; other family from Ohio lived in Galion.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*; "Rosa Burns," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 4 September 1883; and "Making Serious Charges," *The New York Times*, 4 September 1883.

⁶⁸ "Rosa Burns's Death," *op cit*. Mary had learned that Rosa had reconnected with her father, now deceased, and was trying to claim dower rights from Ross Burns's estate.

stillborn child as a result. It was shortly after this sad event that Rosa left to go and live with the de Martins. Before she became ill, de Martin questioned whether her father was indeed dead – Mary had told Rosa he had been killed by Indians “out west.”⁶⁹ De Martin helped Rosa find her father, who, very much alive, was the former mayor of Topeka and senior counsel for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. De Martin paid for Rosa to visit Burns in Kansas. Father and daughter became close; Burns heartily approved of Rosa’s new living arrangements and wrote both Rosa and his son Milton into his will.

Despite the coroner’s ruling, Mary was nowhere near finished. While Rosa was quietly returned to her resting place in the Catholic cemetery, it came out that Rosa had left a will; Ross Burns died a year before Rosa and left a legacy to his only surviving children. Understandably, he had completely ignored his first wife. Rosa, in her will, determined that her inheritance was to go entirely to de Martin in gratitude for his love, attention and care, especially during her last illness. Rosa made no mention of her mother or any of her half-siblings in her will.

Mary was beside herself when the will was read, and it is apparent from the testimony and Mary’s constant changes under oath, that she was more concerned about the money than her daughter’s reputation or legacy. While she had known of Burns’s death, she was unaware of the legacy he left his children. Mary had been engaged in litigation in Topeka since Burns’s death “endeavoring to get possession of the real estate and to compel [Burns’s] Topeka wife to surrender what she has received.”⁷⁰ Of course, the obvious seems to have evaded her logic: by marrying B.F. Sparr without a divorce from Burns, she had committed bigamy, a fact she chose to ignore. The news that he left a legacy to her son and daughter, but not to her, came as a shock as she believed she was entitled to the dower portion of Burns’ estate as his “legitimate wife.”

The probate litigation began in 1886 and dragged on for two years. As the will was contested, more lurid details emerged about Mary Claflin Burns Sparr. None of the details seemed to have embarrassed her in the slightest.

Very quickly it came out publicly that Mary never had a divorce from Burns that she had taken it upon herself to go to Kansas to claim dower rights from his estate. The press and lawyers had a field day which finally culminated in “So, which name do you go by?” “Here, Mrs. Sparr. In the West, Mrs. Burns,” was her reply under oath.⁷¹ Eyebrows were also raised in Kansas because Burns also had not bothered to secure a divorce before remarrying; however, his second wife had little to worry about.

In fairness to both Mary and Burns, these situations were quite common in pre- and post-Civil War America. The complexities of divorce were often so difficult to overcome that a disgruntled partner would simply leave. Men had the upper hand in divorce litigation in most states, so if that man, as had Burns, left for a territory, there was often little a wife could do. Usually, no one knew the better, and the former partners went on with their lives. Beverly Schwartzberg, through her examination of Civil War pension files details very well how common it was for a marriage to dissolve when one of the

⁶⁹ Mary never bothered to tell her children that Ross Burns was alive after the discovery had been made in 1872.

⁷⁰ “Miss Rosa Burns’s Death,” op cit.

⁷¹ “Known by Two Names,” *New York Tribune*, 26 October 1886, p. 3.

partners simply moved away.⁷² Discovery of a bigamous relationship often only occurred when a legal case arose – such as multiple wives with proof of their marriages applied for the pension of their believed-to-be-widower, or, as in the case of Mary, litigation began over another matter.

The court found in favor of de Martin.⁷³ Again, Mary was denied a fortune she believed to be hers. She moved into a Brooklyn house Tennie bought for her and retired. In the latter part of her life, her grip on reality seemed to falter. Mary gossiped that she was one of the first women to graduate from medical school and was one of the first women to practice medicine—saying this often enough that her obituary recorded this as a fact. There was no evidence then and none now that this was true.

She gossiped that she had financed her sisters' famous "Woman's Suffrage Tour" of England in 1877,⁷⁴ perhaps jealous that, while her parents and sister Margaret had all gone to England with Victoria and Tennie, she had been left behind, and, short of a few tokens, was not included in the family's rise into comfort and wealth.

When Tennie married Sir Francis Cook, she sent a painting for safekeeping to her sister Margaret. Tennie had commissioned it as a gift for her benefactor Cornelius Vanderbilt in 1871. Called "Aurora," the painting was left to Tennie in the Commodore's will. Hearing of this, Mary immediately got in touch with the sheriff, preposterously claiming that the painting was actually hers and had been left to *her* by the Commodore, though there is no record of the two ever having met. The painting was seized, and the case settled out of court, though what Mary's claims to the painting could possibly be were never explained.⁷⁵

In 1909, on one of Tennie's frequent trips to the States, she chose to stay in the Manhattan home of long-time friends John and Mabel Hume. Incensed that Tennie chose to stay with the Humes and not to stay with her in Brooklyn, Mary took it upon herself to get a writ of *habeus corpus* that claimed Lady Cook was being held prisoner by the Humes. She claimed that the couple was plotting to "get their hands on Lady Cook's immense estate."⁷⁶ Tennie finally had Millard Sparr speak to his mother and explain that her fears were unfounded because of the nuances of English law. An embarrassed Mary quickly withdrew her suit. Once again, her hysteria was splashed across the news to everyone's embarrassment.

In 1919 or 1920 Mary fell and broke her hip. The injury was debilitating and restricted her to a wheel chair for the rest of her life. Her nurse-attendant had to sleep with a cord tied to her wrist so that Mary could summon her as needed. Mary's mean-spirited nature grew worse with the confinement. Even her previously loyal son Frank moved out. When Tennie died in 1923, leaving an enormous fortune to be split between

⁷² Beverly Schwartzberg, "Lots of Them Did That": Desertion, Bigamy and Marital Fluidity in Late Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of Social History* 37:3 (Spring 2004), pp. 573-600.

⁷³ "Rosa Burns Will," *The New York Times*, 18 January 1887.

⁷⁴ All indications are that the departure of the sisters was financed by Cornelius Vanderbilt's son in order to make them unavailable for the litigation of the Commodore's will, and it certainly was not a "Woman Suffrage Tour."

⁷⁵ "Tennie Claflin's Picture," *The New York Times*, 23 June 1885 and "Women's Rights," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 23 June 1885.

⁷⁶ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 2 June 1910, p. 3; *The Sun*, 2 June 1910, p. 1; and *New York Tribune*, 2 June 1910, p. 14, *The New York Times*, 2 June 1910.

her siblings and their heirs,⁷⁷ no one dared tell Mary that her ship had finally come in for fear of exciting her.⁷⁸

Mary died 16 March 1924 in her Brooklyn home, with no idea that she was, finally, a rich woman. She was 94.

Mrs. Mary Sparr Buried⁷⁹

Funeral services were held last night for Dr. Mary Claflin Sparr, at her home 341 Hancock st., the Rev. Charles T. Snow officiating. Interment was this morning in Evergreens Cemetery.

Mrs. Sparr, who was the wife of the late Dr. Benjamin Samuel [*sic*] Sparr, was one of the first women in the United States to receive a medical Degree, winning it in the early 60s by St. Louis University. She was born in Ohio and until 1871 she lived with her husband in the West, where they conducted a number of hospitals. After his death in 1871 she came to Brooklyn and was well known in medical practice until 1900 when she retired. She broke her hip in a fall four years ago and has been an invalid since.

Mrs. Sparr is survived by two sons, Benjamin F. and Millard Fillmore Sparr, the latter now being in England.

Probate opened. The first will opened left her entire estate to her eldest, and most useless, son Benjamin Franklin, Jr. A second will was uncovered that divided the estate between her two sons by her second marriage and completely cut off their elder half-brother Milton J. Burns.⁸⁰ The wills had been written before Mary's inheritance of her share of Tennie's estate. Had she not been one of Tennessee's heirs, Milton Burns would have probably let things go. As it was, he sued his brothers and the case was settled out of court with the brothers agreeing to split Tennie's inheritance equally. Mary's belongings were sold at an estate auction.

In 1928, Mary's attendant nurse sued the estate for \$10,500 in back wages (and, one assumes, some redress of having to live for four years with a cord tied to her wrist that was connected to "Mrs. Dr. Sparr"). Mary had only allowed her \$5 a month "for food," and had paid her no salary.⁸¹ The nurse won.

Of the surviving sons, Milton J. Burns raised a family in New Jersey, and died in 1933. He is one of the few of Buck and Anna's grandchildren to have living descendants today.

Benjamin Franklin Sparr took his inheritance, moved to England, married, and died in 1928. On his death, it was discovered that he had neglected to divorce his first wife, whom he had married in 1892. The shocked diplomatic corps in charge of recording

⁷⁷ By 1923, Tennie's only surviving siblings were Victoria and Mary. However, Hebern Claflin (d. 1917) had three sons and Margaret (d. 1904) had two daughters. The estate was divided equally between Tennie's siblings. The surviving children of those who had died received an equal share of their parent's portion divided by the number of surviving children. Unfortunately, and probably because no one realized that he had a surviving child having lost touch with the family, Malden's son was overlooked in the probate of Lady Cook's estate. He was a laborer in Minnesota when Tennessee died, and could have used the money.

⁷⁸ "Tennessee Claflin's Sister Too Ill to Be Told She is to Share in Millions," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 7 March 1923, p. 1.

⁷⁹ "Mrs. Mary Sparr Buried," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 19 March 1924.

⁸⁰ "Second Sparr Will Filed; Son by First Marriage Ignored," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 7 May 1924, "On Trial Calendar in Surrogate Court," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 16 November 1924.

⁸¹ *The New York Times*, 26 January 1928. *Brooklyn Eagle*, 27 January 1928, p. 8

American deaths abroad saw to it that the first wife received what was left of the estate he had inherited from his mother.⁸² The second wife, though having no knowledge of his bigamy, received nothing. He had no children by either marriage.

Millard Filmore Sparr married twice, with one daughter from his first marriage. He died sometime between 1930, when he was in the census in Brooklyn in his new career as a steamship engineer, and 1940 when he was not in the census.

⁸² Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, 22 July 1929, Department of State.