

Mary “Polly” (Claflin) (Burns) Sparr¹

Born 6 January 1831 in 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 organization 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.⁵

Mary was, without a doubt, the most colorful of the Claflin children; she is also difficult to take seriously, although her actions were very serious when unleashed. She was third in the birth order, and the second eldest to survive. Born in Pennsylvania before her father moved to Ohio,⁶ she made first census appearance by name when she was newly married to Ross Burns, the local sheriff in Mt. Gilead, Ohio.⁷ All her children fathered by Burns were born in Mt. Gilead. Shortly after the birth of the couple’s youngest child, Burns deserted Mary and went to Kansas. What happened is not at all clear but stands as a good illustration of Mary’s ability and willingness to twist facts to suit her story, even if she was committing perjury or some other offense to do so. 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. The truth was she lost only one child in the timeframe, her youngest, and that child died in Indianapolis of consumption.⁸ In other accounts, all also under oath, she claimed that she made it as far as Linn, Kansas, but that Burns bolted in the night with his new paramour. Mary later claimed that the eldest surviving son, Milton, was taken by his father when he left, but she “stole him back” and won custody.⁹ On another occasion, Mary swore under oath that she and her father did try to contact Burns, but gave up when “the John Brown troubles” interrupted communication, and she assumed he was dead.¹⁰ Whatever the actual details were, 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.

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, US Federal Census records for the place.

³ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 18 March 1924.

⁴ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 19 March 1924.

⁵ E. Whipple, “Death in ‘Our Household,’” *Woodhull & Claflin’s Weekly*, v. 6, no. 8, 26 July 1873.

⁶ Pennsylvania is the place of birth given in her census entries.

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

⁸ He was two, and the body was taken to Spring Grove Cemetery in Cincinnati. He was buried on 17 June 1860, the interment ordered by “Mrs. Mary Burns.” (Spring Grove Interment Records, #8636.) In other testimony, Mary claimed that she had taken her “three children” to Kansas.

⁹ “Old Crimes Recalled,” *The New York Times*, 26 October 1886; “Known by Two Names,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 26 October 1886.

¹⁰ “Tennie C. Claflin and Poverty,” *New York Daily Tribune*, 27 October 1886, p.2, col. 5.

Mary gave up her chase and married Benjamin Franklin Sparr on 18 December 1860 in Hamilton County, Ohio.¹¹ 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.” 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, the youngest in Chicago in 1868.

In 1866, while in St. Louis, “Dr.” B.F. Sparr got wind of the irregular marriage of Mary’s sister Victoria to James H. Blood. Blood was well-known in St. Louis due to his positions as City Auditor, president of a local railroad, and colonel in the local militia. He was also a magnetic healer under the alias of Prof. J.A. Harvey. Sparr was aware of Blood’s alter-ego and plotted to blackmail Blood based on his then bigamous marriage to Victoria. Sparr was right: the marriage was not legal; the couple had married in 1865, but Blood was not legally divorced until 1866 – immediately after which he again married Victoria. During the intervening year, the eminently respectable James H. Blood was, pure and simple, a bigamist. By the time Sparr managed to unleash his plot, Blood was legally married to Victoria, and the plot was diffused for the time being.¹²

By 1868, Victoria and Tennessee were in New York City running a “Magnetic Healing Institute,” out of their home on Great Jones Street.¹³

“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.”¹⁴

¹¹ Marriage Returns, Hamilton County, Ohio, #607.

¹² “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.

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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 womens' parents, moved to the famous Murray Hill mansion at 15 East 38th Street. With their more troublesome relatives 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 for good. The Magnetic Healing Institute at Great Jones Street was no more and Victoria and Tennie were the "Bewitching Brokers of Wall Street," leaving Mary and B.F. Sparr to labor in Brooklyn, laying hands on the gullible.¹⁵ Tennessee, in an effort to put distance between her businesses and the Sparrs even gave them money to "go west and set up business" in late 1869.¹⁶ They did go, and long enough to be recorded in St. Louis in the 1870 census,¹⁷ but before long the Sparrs had again moved in with Victoria and Tennie in their Murray Hill Mansion.¹⁸ 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 ejectment for everyone, but privately made arrangements for herself, Victoria, Col. Blood and her father to move back in.¹⁹ Her mother was installed in a fashionable hotel, and shortly after, the Sparrs and the other relatives were living with her, all on Tennessee's bill.

The instability of Mary's mother, Anna, is well documented. With encouragement from the Sparrs, Anna blamed her family's downward fiscal spiral on her daughters famous daughters and their "free love" associates, most notably Col. Blood and Stephen Pearl Andrews. She 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 understanding that 'magnetic healing' was little more than quackery, business opportunities were drying up. For the Sparrs, that 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, bore the brunt of Anna's blame for the downward mobility of some of her children. In May 1871 the Sparrs convinced Mrs. Claflin to bring charges against Col. 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 as companion pieces to the suit filed by Mary's mother. Sparr went a step further in his saying 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

¹⁵ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 14 May 1869 and 26 May 1869. Ironically, in these two advertisements, two weeks apart, the address of the "Institute" changed.

¹⁶ "Female Financiers' Feuds," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 May 1871, p. 10.

¹⁷ *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, and Mary's eldest son, Milton, was not with the family.

¹⁸ The household was enumerated twice, once in September and once on 20 December; the Sparrs are in the second enumeration. US Federal Census of New York, New York, p. 22, lines 31-34.

¹⁹ "Female Financiers' Feuds," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 May 1871, p. 10.

from what he knows of the same James H. Blood, that he is a man of low and contemptible character.”²⁰ Sparr was never engaged by Woodhull, Claflin & Co. And as for Blood being a man of low character, Sparr was clearly indulging in psychological transference.

The judge offered to throw out the case for lack of grounds (“the worst thing specifically charged against you is living with your wife, and not agreeing with your mother-in-law”),²¹ 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.”²²

The peculiar trial accomplished nothing other than exposing the family’s eccentricities to the public. 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.”²³



Left to right: Tennessee Claflin, Anna Claflin, Mary Sparr. 3 June 1871 *The Day's Doings*.

The judge’s opinion was that the plaintiffs’ evidence did not establish the charges, and he dismissed the case.²⁴

Within days of the decision Anna Claflin went missing. Despite efforts to find her, she remained missing for several days until she turned up at her lodgings in the Washington Hotel at 2 a.m. on the 26th and into the arms of her daughter, Utica. Before her mother was found, Utica told the press that her mother had been missing since the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 8 May 1871, p. 10.

²² *New York Clipper*, 13 May 1871, p 4.

²³ “Claflin Family History,” *Mineral Point Tribune*, 1 June 1871.

²⁴ *The New York Times*, 21 May 1871.

previous Monday and 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.”²⁵

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.”²⁶ However, a few days later, the family’s private drama again boiled over into the press.

On June 7th, 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, to (the story varies) 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 had telegraphed his wife that he was on his way home; but to date his detour has never been explained. Nor was the fact that, as one of the literate members of the family, he signed the hotel register as “Frank Spohor,” while his customary signature was “B.F. Sparr.”²⁷

Benjamin Sparr died on June 6th; his body was found the next day, naked or nearly so, his head having hit the door of his room so hard that the panels were pushed out. He was taken to the morgue for autopsy. The coroner’s ruling of “natural causes,” caused a firestorm from the hysterical widow. 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 the signature in the register clearly not Sparr’s.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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:³⁰

I have written several times and tried to explain my view and feelings to you about Pa and Polly,³¹ 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

²⁵ “Mrs. Claflin Missing,” *The Sun*, 25 May 1871, p. 1.

²⁶ *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).

²⁷ “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.

²⁸ “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 interview Milton Burns as well as Mary.

²⁹ He may have indeed gone to see his sister to ask for money. Mary’s panic at the time suggests he did.

³⁰ In all accounts of Sparr’s death, including Tennessee’s, the letter was attributed to be written by Buck to Tennessee; however, it does read as if it was written to Victoria.

³¹ B.F. Sparr and Mary.

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 Polly 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, and then you can say what you please to them.

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.³²

Despite Buck's statement that she had 'plenty of money,' Mary could not afford to bury her husband. The undertaker refused her offer of her piano as collateral. Her 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.³³

Did Sparr, with accomplices, stage Annie's kidnapping in order to frame Col. Blood? Annie and Mary certainly believed Blood was behind it, but was Sparr? 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; and perhaps leaving it in the hands of accomplices proved fatal as they came to collect their money. Sparr had been pursuing Blood's money and reputation for six years. The fact that Victoria and Tennie had evicted them from the Murray Hill mansion a month before did nothing to help matters. But the death was ruled natural causes³⁴ the wound to the head was attributed to his falling while in fatal distress, a no mention was made of either the irregular signature or the aroma of carbolic acid.

³² "The Dead Doctor Sparr," *The Sun*, 9 June 1871, p. 1. The reporter admitted to stealing the note from Sparr's effects.

³³ "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.

³⁴ 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, inhalation 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.”³⁵

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 gone. While Blood, Victoria and Tennessee certainly had the means to bribe the coroner, 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.³⁶

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, and Margaret merely tolerated her. 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 Margaret Miles instead. Margaret denounced her sisters Mary and Utica saying “one end of the family was trying to eat up the other.”³⁷ 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 send Anna to either Utica or Mary in the event they could not charge her with poisoning the old lady.³⁸

When Utica died in July 1873, Mary was not at the funeral.³⁹

A month after Utica’s death, Mary attended 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), she was ejected. Mistaken in the press for her sister Margaret Miles, Mary picked up the tirade “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.”⁴⁰ Mary, too, was ejected from the meeting. Margaret Miles promptly issued a notice in the *Herald* that it was not she who was at the meeting and identified Mary as the person who had been there.⁴¹

Mary did travel 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 become Lady Cook, Viscountess of Montserrat. Buck had died in 1885 after which Victoria sent her mother to live with Tennessee. Sir Francis Cook paid

³⁵ “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.

³⁶ “Rosa Burns, A Wealthy Young Lady’s Death in New York,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, 4 September 1883.

³⁷ “Excitement in the Woodhull Mansion,” *New York Herald*, 9 April 1872, p. 8, col. 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ “A Peculiar Funeral,” *The Sun* (NY), 14 July 1873, p. 1, col. 4.

⁴⁰ “Spicy Spiritualism,” *Harrisburg Telegraph*, 19 August 1873, p. 2, reprinting from the (NY) *Herald* 18 August 1873.

⁴¹ “The Sunday Night Spiritualists’ Row,” *New York Herald*, 19 August 1873.

Mary \$5000 to take Anna to Brooklyn, which was done in February 1888, so it is possible this trip was to organize the move of the elderly woman. Unlike Lady Cook and Victoria, now Mrs. Martin, 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.

After Sparr's death, Mary continued 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.⁴²

Most of her surviving children moved away. Milton Burns became an artist and went to New Jersey. Her daughter Rosa Burns who estranged from her mother, refused any contact. Youngest son, Millard Sparr, was taken under Lady Cook's wing and educated in England, spending little time in the U.S. He became Tennie's trusted private secretary. Benjamin Franklin Sparr, junior, Mary's eldest son from her second marriage, wandered from job to job but continued to live with his mother, even after what was an apparently brief marriage in January 1891.⁴³

In 1883, Mary's world came crashing down once again; but once again she only focused on the opportunity. Her only surviving daughter Rosa Burns died on the 22nd 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.⁴⁴

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."⁴⁵ 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."⁴⁶

As was always true with Mary, there was more to the story and a fiduciary 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. Mary's hysterics and cries of foul play caused the coroner to exhume the body. Mary insisted that de

⁴² See the city directories of New York, 1871-1883, and Brooklyn 1883-1886.

⁴³ *Brooklyn Eagle*, 19 June 1895, p. 4.

⁴⁴ "Miss Rosa Burns's Death," *The Sun* (New York), 4 September 1883, p. 1, col. 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*; "Rosa Burns," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 4 September 1883; and "Making Serious Charges," *The New York Times*, 4 September 1883.

⁴⁶ "Rosa Burns's Death," *op cit*.

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 stillborn child as a result. It was shortly after this that Rosa left to go and live with the de Martins. Before she became ill, de Martin helped Rosa find her father, who was by then the former mayor of Topeka and senior counsel for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad. Mary had told Rosa had been killed by Indians.⁴⁷ 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.

Mary was nowhere near finished. While Rosa was quietly returned to her resting place in the Catholic cemetery, it came out that Rosa left a will; Ross Burns died a year before Rosa and left a legacy to his surviving children but, understandably, had completely ignored his first wife. Rosa, in turn, determined that her inheritance was to go entirely to 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. She had known of Burns’s death but 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.”⁴⁸ 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.

The probate litigation began in 1866 and went on for two years. As the will was contested, more lurid details emerged about “the Claflins.”

Very quickly it came out publicly that Mary never had a divorce from Burns as well as the fact that Mary 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.⁴⁹ Eyebrows were also raised in Kansas because Burns had not bothered to secure a divorce, either, however, he made a career after Mary as a good lawyer, and his second wife had little to worry about.

The court found in favor of de Martin.⁵⁰ Again, Mary was cut out of a fortune she believed to be hers. She moved into a Brooklyn house Jennie bought for her and retired. Her son Benjamin took care of her while Millard divided his time between England and Brooklyn. Mary gossiped that she was one of the first women to graduate from medical

⁴⁷ Mary never bothered to tell her children that Ross Burns was alive after the discovery had been made in 1872.

⁴⁸ “Miss Rosa Burns’s Death,” op cit.

⁴⁹ “Known by Two Names,” *New York Tribune*, 26 October 1886, p. 3.

⁵⁰ “Rosa Burns Will,” *The New York Times*, 18 January 1887.

school and was one of the first women to practice medicine—saying this often enough that her obituary recorded this as a fact.

She gossiped that she had financed her sisters' famous "Woman's Suffrage Tour" of England in 1877,⁵¹ perhaps jealous that, while her parents and sister Margaret had all gone to England with Victoria and Tennie, she was 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 will of the Commodore. Hearing of this, Mary immediately got in touch with the sheriff, preposterously claiming that the painting was hers and had been left to her by the Commodore. It was seized, and the case settled out of court., though what Mary's claims to the painting were never explained.⁵²

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. Insulted that Tennie chose not to stay with her in Brooklyn, Mary got a writ of *habeus corpus* claiming that Lady Cook, was being held prisoner by the Humes who were plotting to "get their hands on Lady Cook's immense estate."⁵³ Tennie finally had Millard Sparr speak to his mother and explain that her fears were unfounded because of the nuances of English law and an embarrassed Mary quickly withdrew her suit. Once again, her hysteria was splashed across the news.

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 irascible 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 her siblings and their heirs, no one dared tell Mary that her ship had finally come in because of fears of exciting her.⁵⁴

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 Buried⁵⁵

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 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.

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² "Tennie Claflin's Picture," *The New York Times*, 23 June 1885 and "Women's Rights," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 23 June 1885.

⁵³ *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.

⁵⁴ "Tennessee Claflin's Sister Too Ill to Be Told She is to Share in Millions," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 7 March 1923, p. 1.

⁵⁵ "Mrs. Mary Sparr Buried," *Brooklyn Eagle*, 19 March 1924.

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 found 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 Sparr, but completely cut off their elder half-brother Milton J. Burns.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷

Of the surviving sons, Milton J. Burns raised a family in New Jersey. He died in 1933.

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 American deaths abroad saw to it that the first wife received what was left of the estate he had inherited from his mother.⁵⁸ The second wife, though having no knowledge of his bigamy, received nothing. He had no children by either marriage.

Millard Fillmore 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.

⁵⁶ "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.

⁵⁷ *The New York Times*, 26 January 1928. *Brooklyn Eagle*, 27 January 1928, p. 8

⁵⁸ Report of the Death of an American Citizen, American Consular Service, 22 July 1929, Department of State.