

## SHOW BUSINESS

From the *Ottawa Free Trader*, April 1864:

MISS TENNESSEE CLAFLIN,

*The Great Magnetic Doctress and Clairvoyant Physician,*

who has so astonished the people by her wonderful cures and mysterious revelations during her travels in the United States, examining the sick and afflicted, curing them with unparalleled success, and through her magnetic influence and wonderful operations, has caused invalids to walk in a very short time who had not done so for many years. This lady seems to be endowed with the healing art, and supernatural gifts to such a remarkable degree, that she convinces the most skeptical of her wonderful powers and gives information of much importance that people from every walk of life come to consult her. Her skill and powers of mind are so great, there seems to be no disease but will give way to her treatment.

This lady is a physician, indeed. Cancers killed and extracted in from 4 to 24 hours, without pain or the use of instruments. She has established her Infirmary at the Fox River House, in Ottawa, Illinois, where she may be consulted upon all matters pertaining to Life, Health, and Diseases of the Human System.

All who wish to test her skill and powers of mind, should call immediately.

**CONSULTATIONS \$1.00**

*May 1868*

*The Improved Movement Cure Institute  
67 West Thirty-Eighth Street*

The door is ajar, enough to lean forward and peer out. "My God!" Tennessee mutters and puts her bag next to the commode. "Must I live this life always?" She's been confined to the water closet a good thirty minutes, careful to arrive unseen by all and sundry.

If she leans toward the left, she can spy her sister closing the drapes while someone else lights candles on a large round table. Tennessee fumbles out of her jacket and unbuttons her

skirt. She leans toward the right, and her skirt falls to the ground. She pushes it aside with her foot, then steps out of her boots. She hasn't bothered with undergarments. All she wears is a thin chain round her neck with a pick for the lock she practiced on earlier.

"After tonight," she promises herself, "you'll be your own mistress."

Stock brokerage, Tennessee decides. She unpins her hair. Investment, that's what she'll do. After all, this is New York City. Enough with the séance shenanigans.

She slips on a gossamer sheath and runs her fingers over the fabric. It's transparent, save for the illuminated paint they'd used earlier. Just a bit, here and there, to enhance its otherworldliness. She hears the participants enter, taking their seats around the table. They introduce themselves using their given names only. Tennessee puts a black cloak over her shoulders and angles herself to study the Spirit Box on the far side of the room. The box is tall as a man and made of quartersawn oak.

Earlier, when Victoria confirmed the appointment, Tennessee had protested that they hadn't performed the Spirit Box in ages.

But Victoria had smiled, "It will be fresh then, won't it?" which tickled Tennessee's funny bone. Fresh for crazy, unrehearsed and dangerous. Like it was when they were girls, scrambling, conniving, and doing their damndest to make it work out.

Then Victoria had added, "Afterall, Tennie, it's not as though you're a blushing virgin." Which is true enough.

The candles are placed in front of each participant. Tennessee watches Victoria sit down next to a familiar looking woman.

"I thought your sister was in attendance?" the woman whose name is Harriet whispers to Victoria.

"She will join us later, at the reception," Victoria answers, then says to the others, "May I request that we begin with one of my favorites, *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*? I am Mrs. Woodhull. I mean, Victoria," and extends her arms as everyone at the table joins hands. There is a moment's stillness.

"Oh, Lord," Victoria says, looking heavenward. "It is my prayer that Your love may abound, so our hearts are pure and blameless for the day of Christ. Filled with the fruit of righteousness, to the glory and praise of God. Amen."

The participants answer, "Amen."

Victoria gently releases the hands on either side of her and instructs, "After I am secured within the Spirit Box, please, blow out your candles and begin to sing."

A man walks her to the cabinet. He binds her wrists with a silken cord, then closes the door and locks her in. The key safely inside his waistcoat, he returns to his seat.

Everyone there is a devoted believer, each with a passionate reason for attending. They rejoin their hands, their elbows suspended in the air above the table. Harriet blows out her candle and the others follow suit. The darkness is absolute. Someone begins, then everyone joins in.

*Jesus, lover of my soul,  
Let me to Thy bosom fly,  
While the nearer waters roll  
While the tempest still is high!*

As soon as she can hear Victoria singing from inside the cabinet, Tennessee pads into the room, unnoticed by the participants in the dark. She takes the pick and runs her fingers down the door of the Spirit Box. She finds the lock and opens the door.

Being double-jointed, Victoria has slipped off the cord. The sisters approach the participants on either side of the table. Tennessee stands behind Harriet.

*Wilt Thou not regard my call?  
Wilt Thou not accept my prayer?*

“Mother,” Tennessee whispers. “Oh, mother.”

*Lo! I sink, I faint, I fall—  
Lo! On Thee I cast my care:  
Reach me out Thy gracious hand!*

She touches Harriet’s face, almost imperceptibly. “I am blessed in the arms of the Lord and watch over you and my brothers and sisters.” Tennessee’s kiss is soft on the back of Harriet’s neck. “Every moment, Mother.”

Harriet sighs, and Tennessee knows the woman’s heart is filled with longing.

*While I of Thy strength receive,  
Hoping against hope I stand*

Whispering, touching, the act goes on while everyone continues to sing. Tennessee crosses the room and lets the cloak fall from her shoulders. She lights a stick of flint with her thumbnail and holds it overhead, watching the participants, naked underneath her gossamer shroud. Should anyone open their eyes, they’ll be riveted by her tantalizing specter, while Victoria, unseen, sneaks back into the Spirit Box. That done, Tennessee extinguishes the flame and quickly pulls the cloak over herself. Obscured in the darkness, she re-locks the Spirit Box, and seemingly vanishes into thin air.

The hymn is finished. Everyone is still. Through the crack in the door, Tennessee begins to sing an old, old, version of *Haec Dies*. She starts quietly, increasing the volume as she hears Victoria’s harmony through the Spirit Box.

*Haec dies quam fecit Dominus!* This is the day the Lord Hath made!  
*Exultemus et laetemur in ea, alleluia!* Let us be glad and rejoice therein, Hallelujah!

They sing it three times. Music is the gift and the Lord is the light. What the sisters do with the rest of it is how they feed the family.

#

Afterward, everyone gathers in the parlor. Tennessee is fully dressed, the pick safely put away. "I don't believe we have had the pleasure," the host, Dr. Taylor, presents himself.

"I am Mrs. Woodhull's sister, Tennie C. Claflin, at your service."

"How do you find our humble clinic, Miss Claflin?"

"Indeed!" Tennessee exclaims. "I am fascinated by your invention of the water chair."

"Ah yes, the water chair is a most efficacious remedy for Hysteria." He smiles with pride. "Its movement provides a continuous tide, releasing those afflicted by life's travails, to crisis. Its success has been," he offers Tennessee a cup of tea, "without limitation."

Tennessee notices the elegant Harriet whom she had called Mother. Harriet has pale grey eyes, like her own. Who is she?

"Praise the Lord," Harriet says. "I have been with my cherished husband more than thirty years and Hysteria has been my cross to bear for just as long now. On advice from our family surgeon, we have invited him to operate on our daughter and to surgically remove the physical source of her Hysteria altogether."

The tea scalds the back of Tennessee's throat when she realizes who Harriet is. She struggles not to sputter.

Harriet adds, "Consequently, she now has dimples above and below."

"But how," Victoria exclaims, "can she then conceive a child in wholeness?"

"Is this lapsang souchong?" Tennessee asks, wondering how Victoria has failed to recognize Mrs. Stowe. "Vicky, it's delicious."

"Is it not in the Bible," Victoria ignores her, "or certainly, praise the Lord, in the Spirits, that both partners must enjoy ecstatic release for a child to be blessed by God?"

There is an uncomfortable silence. No one dares to respond. Finally, Harriet Beecher Stowe replies, "To imply there is a connection between a woman doing *that* and the wholeness of any resulting children is barbaric and disgusting. No Christian woman exposes her husband to such a repugnant loss of self-control." She turns to Dr. Taylor. "I shall take my nourishment in my room. Good night."

"Good night, Mrs. Stowe."

The evening is crisp, the smell of fires in the grate mingle with new leaves and fragrant blossoms as the hansom cab makes its way toward Greenwich Village.

"*Uncle Tom's Cabin*," Tennessee chuckles. "We always loved that book. Fancy that!"

“It’s not funny, Tennie,” Victoria groans. “Harriet Beecher Stowe is a public figure. I’ll have to make amends somehow.”

“*Uncle Tom’s Cabin!*” Tennessee laughs. “We can call it *Uncle Tom’s Crisis* now.”

***June 1868***  
***The Manhattan Club***  
***96 Fifth Avenue***

As Reuben Buckman Claflin begins to nod off, he is overcome with a rush of joy known only to fathers. It is not through his own efforts, but rather those of his daughters that he is able to sit dozing amongst civilized men in a rarified corner. New York City is indeed a land of marvels.

Buck wakes with a start. Looking around, he recognizes an old acquaintance. Why, it’s Jesse Grant! Father of the general everyone knows will soon become president. Jesse is with a younger man and greets Buck with much enthusiasm. They order some cognac and discuss the passage of time, and how extraordinary the years have proven to be.

“Tell me about those girls of yours,” Jesse says, then chuckles reciting, “Three sisters fair, of worth and weight, a queen, a city and a state,” a verse he’d made up years ago for Buck’s three youngest children.

A treasured memory of a trick dances in Buck’s mind. It always sent shivers of delight down his daughters’ backs. “Give it here, give it here,” he’d say, handing them a smooth golden-colored stone, no bigger than a penny. Buck would then open his mouth, and they’d place it on his tongue. Pretending to swallow it, he’d show he had nothing up his sleeves, nothing in his mouth, nothing in his hands. He’d tell the girls—Victoria, Utica, and Tennessee, the three from Jesse’s verse—“Clap two times!” and Buck would gasp, pulling the stone from behind the ear of the girl sitting nearest him. It was marvelous. Every single time.

Buck smiles. He says nothing of the years since the War. No one wants to hear about failed marriages, intemperance, lies, or disappointment. The old men order more cognac.

Buck says, “Victoria has an uncanny gift. No rapping or tapping, like those Fox sisters. None of that. She just goes into a trance, and her insights are extraordinary. Our youngest, Tennessee, she performs a magnetic healing that awakens the youth and raises the vigor of a man, such as yourself, to one’s, shall we say, former vitality.”

“I daresay, one is never too young to awaken one’s vigor,” Jesse’s companion observes. Buck raises his eyebrows, nodding in agreement.

“Claflin,” Jesse Grant says, “this is my good friend, Luther Challis.”

“Challis,” Buck says, “what is it you do?”

“Stocks, mostly. I’m an investor.” Challis smiles. His teeth are spread widely within his mouth, the space between them suggesting he’s a few teeth short. But he is impeccably dressed. If Buck should lean forward, he’d see his own reflection in the shine of the younger man’s boots.

“My youngest, Tennessee,” Buck says. “She’s most taken with learning investment.”

“That’s unusual,” Challis says. He imagines someone restoring his vitality even as she studies the stock market, “for a woman.”

Buck nods and agrees, “I think you’d find her very unusual, indeed.”

from the *Lycoming Chronicle*, Williamsport, PA 1858

**A CURIOUS FACT** – We are informed that Miss T. Claflin is astonishing the citizens by her extraordinary clairvoyant powers. She is visited daily by many who are anxious to convince themselves of her apparent supernatural powers. She gives any information requested and answers all questions with singular accuracy.

To test her supernatural claim many have asked her the question, “how much money have I in my pocket,” and received in all cases correct answers to the astonishment of all present. Gives the age of the questioner, or of his relations, with the number of brothers and sisters, with their residence, names, etc. Can tell the contents of pockets or carpet bags with astonishing accuracy.

*July 1868*  
*17 Great Jones Street*

No one else is in the reception room. “Tennie! Was machst du da?” Her mother, Roxana, gasps and tries to grab the portfolio from Tennessee’s arms. Inside it are clippings from before the War. In Ohio, then in Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Illinois, Roxana and Buck Claflin ran the show. Sometimes in a hotel, sometimes out of a tent. All their daughters performed, but Tennessee was their youngest child, and from the age of eight she was the main attraction.

Mother and daughter struggle by the stove, the top of which is open, waiting to receive more of the crumpled clippings.

“Stop it, stop it!” Roxana cries. “Why do you do this?”

“It’s ancient history, Ma.” Tennessee is trembling, the portfolio clutched against her chest. “Those days are over. Even Vicky says it’s best forgotten. And, the Colonel—”

“The Colonel—” Roxana nearly spits at the mention of Victoria’s husband, Colonel Blood.

“The Colonel says it’s my chance to make a clean start of it.”

“Why? Why should you do that?”

Tennessee cannot believe Roxana is so delusional as to ask such a thing. There can be no defense let alone explanation for what happened at the Fox River House.

“That woman had been dying from the cancer regardless of the ministrations you gave!” Buck had shouted at Tennessee. “How could we have known her family would lodge a complaint?”

Or that there’d be an arrest warrant for manslaughter? Manslaughter. The part of Tennessee’s skin which has been threatening to flare, shoots fire down the inside of her arm. To answer will only summon the anguish from those years, those days. But this is not her mother’s fault. Loving and resenting her together is too complicated.

“Vicky and Colonel Blood rescued me when they took me away from that kind of life.” It is impossible for Tennessee to keep the sob from her voice, “They are the best friends I have ever had—”

To which Roxana wails, “Herr besuchte uns!” and runs upstairs, weeping.

In front of the house at Great Jones Street is a small patch of lawn surrounded by a wrought iron fence with a gate which prevents stray pigs wandering in off Lafayette Street from sullyng the stoop. Everyone agrees, the arrangement is splendid. The house is large enough for the four sisters’ parents, three husbands, and assorted children. The fifth sister, Meg, who is Roxana and Buck Claflin’s eldest daughter, lives uptown with her own family.

That evening, Buck makes the introductions. “Mr. Challis has been a railroad man and now operates on Wall Street. Speculation in gold, isn’t it?”

Tennessee thinks her father’s friend bows too deeply to be anything other than mocking. As he straightens up, she recognizes the look he gives her. It doesn’t take much to smell a rat. Tennessee crosses her arms, waiting.

Challis says, “Miss Claflin, do you find my bow impertinent?”

Colonel Blood has coached Tennessee on her use of English, so she’s ready with the comeback, her smile demure. “Indeed, I find it nothing less than obsequious.”

It surprises her when Luther Challis roars with laughter.

He becomes a frequent guest at Great Jones Street. Like Colonel Blood, he served under General Grant, and they exchange stories while Challis admires Tennessee, his eyes watchful, eager to assist in her mastery of finance.

Challis takes a pair of greenbacks from his billet-fold. “What do you see in my hand?”

“A pair of dollars, of course.”

“But are they? They’re just paper indicating that they’re dollars.” He takes out a coin. “If I hold up this, what do I have?”

“It’s a silver dollar.”

“So, which one is more valuable?”

She points to the coin. “This one, of course.”

“Buy gold, Tennie. Buy as much as you can.”

“But what about the greenbacks?”

“They’re only paper. Lines of credit.”

Challis treats Roxana with deference and insists on carrying the cake plates into the kitchen with Tennessee, leaning next to her when they put the dishes down. Challis stands waiting, as though he had asked if there were any more cake to be had.

“I shan’t consider you romantically,” Tennessee warns.

He smiles. “Is that because of your disposition, or is it something other?”

Three years before, there’d been a husband who held up his hands, covered with sores. “One night with Venus, a lifetime with mercury, is the saying, ain’t it?” Since that day, she can only assume that what has plagued her is indeed the French disease. Scars of Venus, courtesy of a devil who gave her the scaling which crawls across her hips, down her inner thigh with an itch, something fierce. This evening finds Tennessee’s legs and belly covered in her mother’s lungwort liniment, then wrapped in muslin strips to mitigate her symptoms.

Tennessee answers, “Do you not have a wife in Kansas?”

Challis takes the last macaroon from the dessert dish. He throws it into the air, catching it with his mouth like a seal. He chews and swallows, then leans toward her, his face only inches from her own. “Miss Claflin, I fail to see the import of this question.”

He places a mighty slap on her rump and leaves to join the others. She hears him say something which makes Roxana laugh. The hand on her person aside, Tennessee is forced to admit that Luther Challis is easy to be around.