

# *Prattle & Titter*

## *Violet's Tale*



*When you think of Hollywood in the 1930's, one of the first things that comes to mind is "fashion revolution". Gone were the flappers and Jazz Age looks of the 20s; this new era brought sleek, form-fitting, full-length and bias-cut skirts into style. Suddenly everyone seemed to shimmer, in silks and velvets decorated with beads and diamante stones. One or the other of the girls turned out in a glittering backless*

*sequin-covered gown, and the others quickly followed suit. Fashion historians credit the bigger names with all things innovation, but it was more home-grown than that, at least at first. Word was, a shop opened right between Hollywood and Beverly Hills, where a talented dressmaker with a penchant for sparkle took up residence in the early 30s. Someone said she came in one day on a train from the mid-west, with nothing but a suitcase and a little black book. Now SHE would have been someone worth interviewing.*

- Edith Bensoussan, Editor, *Past Forward Fashion Magazine*

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Maddie Mae raised eight daughters in a brothel, in the years leading up to the turn of the 19th century into the 20th, and some years beyond, somewhere in Kansas, or possibly Nebraska. The details evolved in the telling and re-telling of Maddie's story, among the generations of family members down in Parsons, Chanute, and Erie. Over time, she became a stage whisper after one-too-many-highballs before supper. She was a juicy piece of gossip, or a shameful warning of what becomes of girls with loose morals, or an occasional anecdote. At times she even appeared as an encouragement: "If Maddie Mae Clark can raise eight girls in a brothel, surely you can do THIS!"

The gist of it was that Maddie Mae, herself the 7th of 14 children, had taken off from the family farm one day. She'd just put down her basket, wiped her sweaty forehead, looked up and down the row she was working, and turned toward the road. The others barely noticed her leaving, heads down and hands to their own tasks. On any given day, each of the children made several trips for nature's call, so no one thought differently as Maddie walked away. It wasn't until dinner that anyone asked after her. She'd been about 12 then.

Some years later a South Dakota cousin got too deep in the moonshine and told the men in Aunt Lila's barn that he'd heard of a "school for young ladies" where a friend of his had passed some time. This friend had learned that a girl to his liking had originally been from somewhere "around here". Her name was Maddie Mae, and she had three little girls living in the brothel with her.

That was the first of many stories that cropped up about Maddie. No one ever admitted to having seen her in person. It was always a fourth or fifth-hand account, but little by little what was known of Maddie Mae after she left that farm came into focus.

According to family lore, she eventually became the Madam of that house, and ran it until her death. Her eight daughters, each named after a flower and of unknown paternity, worked in the house as maids, cooks, gardeners, and even nannies for the other children born there, but Maddie had forbidden her daughters to entertain. By any account, Maddie had been strict, seeing to it that her daughters and the other girls learned to read and write and do numbers. That was how it came to be called a school for young ladies in the first place.

One by one the daughters lived out their own stories; there was Lily, who married a town storekeeper; Maggie, for Magnolia, who became the schoolteacher of a town nearby; Rose, who ran off with a man who visited the brothel for the usual reasons. That story went that the gentleman asked for Rose's private company but was sharply rebuked by Maddie Mae, who quickly set him straight. He left without taking company but came around the next day with a bouquet of peonies,

asking Rose for a date. Maddie Mae ran him off but he kept coming back. He claimed he'd taken one look at Rose and changed his ways. One day Rose was just gone, and nobody in the family ever saw or heard from her, or her gentleman, again.

Poppy died young, a victim of scarlet fever.

Twins Iris and Terry (for Wisteria) caught a coach headed east with tips saved from their years doing jobs and errands for the working girls. They got as far as Chicago. Drawn by bustle and excitement, they found work in the home of a wealthy family. The twins spent their lives side by side; when the war came, they took factory jobs, and after the war, they met and married returning soldiers in a double wedding. They lived next door to each other, had babies at the same time, buried their husbands within the same year, and spent their remaining years once again living together.

Not long after the twins settled into their new married lives, Daisy turned up on Terry's doorstep. By then Prohibition had begun, and along with it, an underground world of grit and glamor where Daisy found herself inexplicably lured. She caught the eye of a member of a prominent "family" and spent her best years as a mob mistress. When she lost her looks and her lover's attention, she ended her own life in the oversized bathtub of the house he'd kept her in for almost two decades.

The youngest girl stayed the longest. Arguably the plainest of Maddie's daughters, Violet nonetheless had a talent for styling hair, applying make-up, and making the most modest garments seem more glamorous, with a bit of lace or a sparkly detail. She endeared herself to the working girls with her skill for making them more alluring, and thus earning them more money.

While years passed and her sisters went their ways, Violet gradually took on the responsibilities they left behind. By the time Maddie Mae was near the end of her life, Violet was running the brothel.

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One afternoon while Maddie Mae dozed, Violet went to put a ring away in her mother's jewelry box. The ring hung loosely from Maddie's finger now, as the sickness ate up her body. Violet gazed at the jewelry nestled in red velvet, a small collection of rings and one locket on a silver chain. None of the items were new to her; Maddie Mae had worn each of the modest pieces at one time or another. Having looked inside the box lots of times, Violet was surprised to discover a second compartment, under the first. It held a single key. Keenly aware of what went on in the house, Violet knew this would be the key to her mother's bottom desk drawer. No one knew what Maddie kept there.

Now, as she lifted the key, Violet startled when Maddie Mae croaked, "Take that and open the drawer, dear, and bring me the little black book you'll see."

Answering a question that hadn't been asked, Violet said, "I was putting your ring away."

Her mother waved weakly in a gesture of not to worry, and said, "That's all right. Bring the book."

Doing as she was bidden, Violet opened the drawer and saw several books, but only one little black one. It was roughly the size of a large bible, leatherbound, and about two inches thick. There was no title to hint what kind of book it was, and Violet didn't peek. She wanted to see what Maddie Mae meant to do with it.

Maddie Mae took the book and patted the bed next to her for Violet to sit. "It's almost my time now. What will you do?" She asked her youngest daughter.

Violet looked into her mother's fading eyes, aware the end was close. Making no pretense otherwise, she simply said, "I expect I'll run this house, as you always have."

Maddie Mae started shaking her head before Violet finished. "No, my dear, it is time for this house to become something new, and for these girls to do the same. It is a different world now, with more to do and be than there was once. It is time for us all to move on." A cough racked her body, then quieted again, and she took a deep steadying breath. "There's another war coming. Alone in this house is no place for unwed girls when there's war. There's no telling what war will bring. Best you all find better before it comes." She opened the book then, and Violet gasped.

It was only the shell of a book. Inside, the pages were hollowed out and bills were stuffed into the hull. "I've always put by, from my first day here. Sometimes more than others. Babies had to eat. Everyone needed thick shoes and warm clothes in the cold. But I managed to tuck away just the same." She paused, closed her eyes, and took a few breaths. "And there were some good paying customers sometimes. That helped. I didn't live bigger for having more money. Remember that. When life gives you extra, keep living the same and put by for another time."

There was quiet for a bit, while the two women sat; Violet, pondering the money, her mother's words, and the unknown future; Maddie Mae, pensive, fingering the bills gently.

After a while, Maddie Mae spoke again. "I was just a girl when I left the farm. It had been in my mind for ages, it felt like. I didn't like farm life. It was hard work every minute, with nothing but the promise of more. All I could see was me in a row forever, one of many children, and then the mother of many children, planting and picking and living and dying in some row, with some dirt-covered man giving orders and using me up." She smiled then, a faraway smile with self-derision tugging at its corners. "This place wasn't my dream. I can't say I had any dream except to get away from the farm. But when I got here it felt like far enough. And it wasn't as hard as the farm, or as dirty, or as hopeless, it seemed to me. Anyway, I put down, made do, and all in all, it was better than I figured I'd end up with, back there and back then."

Now she gently closed the book and took Violet's hand. "Take this. Settle the girls respectably, there's enough. Take the rest and make your life. Choose it. Don't 'end up'. I did my best for you girls, and here's the rest, to do with as you please. Choose well, my dear."

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We buried Mama next to Poppy. Lily and Maggie came to the funeral and had lunch in the house with me and the other girls. I sent letters to Iris, Terry, Daisy, and Rose to let them know. People

said we never heard from Rose again, but that wasn't true. When she married Danny, they took off all the way to Los Angeles, but she wrote to us. She told us about the ocean in the first letter. She spoke often about how warm it always was, and how it almost never rained. She made the people sound like royalty.

I helped the girls figure things out. It was easier than I'd expected to see them resituated, and Mama was right. There was enough money to help, and plenty leftover. There was twenty thousand dollars in that hollowed out book. Once I sold the house and the furnishings, I bought myself a brand-new traveling outfit, and two new every-day dresses. Then I took my suitcase and that little black book – my only possessions - to the train station. I bought a one-way ticket to California.