



THE
Maybelline
STORY

and the Spirited Family Dynasty
Behind It

A richly told story of a forty-year, white-hot
love triangle that fans the flames of a major
worldwide conglomerate.

—Neil Shulman, Associate Producer, *Doc Hollywood*

SHARRIE WILLIAMS with BETTIE YOUNGS

Foreword by Michael Levine

“A woman’s most powerful possession is a man’s imagination.”

—*Maybelline Ad, 1934*

In 1915, when a kitchen stove fire singed his sister Mabel’s lashes and brows, Tom Lyle Williams watched in fascination as she performed a “secret of the harem”—mixing petroleum jelly with coal dust and ash from a burnt cork and apply it to her lashes and brows. Mabel’s simple beauty trick ignited Tom Lyle’s imagination and he started what would become a billion-dollar business, one that remains a viable American icon after nearly a century. He named it Maybelline in her honor.

Throughout the 20th century, the Maybelline Company inflated, collapsed, endured, and thrived in tandem with the nation’s upheavals—as did the family that nurtured it. Setting up shop first in Chicago, Williams later, to avoid unwanted scrutiny of his private life, cloistered himself behind the gates of his Rudolph Valentino Villa and ran his empire from a distance.

Now after nearly a century of silence, this true story celebrates the life of an American entrepreneur, a man whose vision rocketed him to success along with the woman held in his orbit, Evelyn Boecher—who became his lifelong fascination and muse. Captivated by her “roaring charisma,” he affectionately called her the “real Miss Maybelline” and based many of his advertising campaigns on the woman she represented: commandingly beautiful, hard-boiled and daring. Evelyn masterminded a life of vanity, but would fall prey to fortune hunters and a mysterious murder that even today remains unsolved.

A fascinating and inspiring story of ambition, luck, secrecy—and surprisingly, above all, love and forgiveness, a tale both epic and intimate, alive with the clash, the hustle, the music, and dance of American enterprise.

An engrossing and captivating tale that spans four generations and reveals the humanity, glamour, and seedy underside of a family intoxicated by the quest for wealth, power, and perfection. This book is classic literary satisfaction, a real page-turner. —**Nina Siesmasko, actress, *The West Wing***

We are especially fascinated to slip vicariously into the lives of the rich and privileged yet cheer for the underdog who overcomes obstacles to astound doubters with his success. We are enthralled with the historical sweep of events whose repercussions live on to the present, all elements of this amazing story—which reads like a juicy novel but is a family memoir distilled from nine hundred pages of family accounts from the 1920’s to present. —**Steven Hudis, producer, IMPACT Motion Pictures**



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SHARRIE WILLIAMS with BETTIE B. YOUNGS



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Disclaimer: This is a true story, and the characters and events are real. However, in some cases, the names, descriptions, and locations have been changed, and some events have been altered, combined, or condensed for storytelling purposes, but the overall chronology is an accurate depiction of the author's experience.

On the cover: Mildred Davis (the very first Hollywood starlet used in a Maybelline ad), Evelyn Boecher Williams, and screen star Betty Grable.

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What Others Are Saying about This Book . . .

Love and tenderness are palpable in a sensitive recount of this amazing historical memoir. This is NOT a one time read. A literary prism, relevant to the boardroom as it is to a book club or fireside/poolside read. Truly an inspirational legacy reminding us in the words of Proust that: “the voyage of discovery lies not in finding new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

—Diane Bruno, CISION MEDIA

An exciting and thoughtful book, part memoir, part history, part family saga, that reveals the triumphs and tragedies behind the many faces of Maybelline.

—Mark A. Clements, author, *Lorelei*

We are especially fascinated to slip vicariously into the lives of the rich and privileged yet cheer for the underdog who overcomes obstacles to astound doubters with his success. We are enthralled with the historical sweep of events whose repercussions live on to the present—all elements of this amazing story, which reads like a juicy novel but is a memoir distilled from nine hundred pages of family accounts from the 1920s to the present.

—Steve Hudis, producer, IMPACT Motion Pictures

Superb! An exciting tale that gives an insider’s view into the genesis of a corporate giant. A wild ride, an enticing saga.

—Alan Andrews Ragland, son of Maybelline legend “Rags” Ragland

Spanning four generations, *The Maybelline Story* traces the founding of one of the true great family enterprises that spawned the billion-dollar cosmetic industry and reveals the glamour—and seedy underside—of sudden fortune and unrestrained vanity on the family dynasty behind it. Wow to seeing this on screen!

—Nina Siemaszko, actress, *The West Wing*

A richly told story of a forty-year, white-hot love triangle that fans the flames of a major worldwide conglomerate.

—Neil Shulman, MD, associate producer, *Doc Hollywood*

A truly inspirational story chronicling the journey and unwavering faith of the family behind the rise of an iconic brand.

Brigitte Lamblot, Publisher, VIE Magazine

Even if you come away from reading this book thinking that the family dynasty created in the founding of Maybelline was a bit over the top, “over the top” was what was expected from the generation that brought it about. This story may read like a novel, but it is, alas, a true one!

—Nancy Williams Fesler, great niece of Tom Lyle Williams

We loved this!

—Holly Siegel, beauty editor, *NYLON* Magazine

This book has value beyond its capacity to glimpse history and even beyond its sheer joy to entertain. This exciting book provides insight into the nature of money, and inherent issues in building a dynasty.

—Kolie Crutcher III, CEO and publisher, *Get Money* magazine

Tom Lyle, my great-uncle—and the godfather of our family—made us all rich, in more ways than one! But it is hard for us to separate Maybelline from our family, because it was a family affair, literally. This is a story I lived and a family I love.

—William Preston Williams III

An interesting—and astonishing—account of the making of a mega-giant [Maybelline] and a cast of characters you won't believe! Entertaining and insightful.

—Charmaine Hammond, author, *On Toby's Terms*

Exciting stuff! A captivating story that uncovers the intriguing past behind one of America's most well-known cosmetic companies.

—Michele Marcotte, features editor, *The Daily Sentinel*

As an immigrant who escaped the tyranny of Communist Romania, I survived my ordeal because of the devotion and values learned at the knees of my parents. In this story, the values learned focused on the world of artifice . . . also learned at the knees of their parents . . . but oh what a different legacy. A jolting story.

—Aura Imbarus, author, *Out of the Transylvania Night*

A rich and colorful story. I guarantee you won't be able to put this book down! I only hope it goes to the big screen, and you can bet I'd like to play Evelyn!

—Marla Martenson, actress, author, *Diary of a Beverly Hills Matchmaker*

A most amazing story.

—John St. Augustine, author, *Living an Uncommon Life: Essential Lessons from 21 Extraordinary People*

Contents

Foreword, by Michael Levine	xi
Preface, by Alan Andrews Ragland.....	xiii
Prologue: Smoke and Fire.....	xv

Part 1

An Idea Is Born (1912–1926)

1. Inventing Tom Lyle Williams	3
2. A Thousand Dimes a Day.....	13
3. A Secret from the Harem.....	19
4. The Little Red Box	29
5. The Return of a Different Man.....	35
6. Triangle	41
7. Geometry of the Heart	49
8. Leaving Chicago.....	55
9. A Ring and Roses	61
10. The Godfather.....	67

Part 2

The Eyes Have It

The Start of Something Big (1927–1936)

11. Doctor's Orders, Darling.....	73
12. The Stetson	77
13. This, You Gotta See	81
14. The Business of Family	87

15. The Deal	91
16. Who's Virginia?	97
17. Miss Maybelline and Mr. Hyde	101
18. Crashes.....	107
19. Buddy, Can You Spare \$30,000?.....	115
20. After the Roar	121
21. Brave Fronts	127
22. Rags and Riches	133
23. The Prodigal.....	143
24. Oh, Preston	147
25. Paradise West	153
26. The Man in the Llama Coat	157

Part 3

The Third Front (1937–1949)

27. Miss Mom.....	163
28. Miss Maybelline Is Back . . . Sort Of.....	169
29. True Confessions	173
30. Technicolor	179
31. The Girl Who Was Not a Dame.....	185
32. Plaid Skirt Meets Silk Kimono	191
33. Black Velvet Meets Apron.....	195
34. "I'll Never Smile Again"	199
35. Chica Chica Boom Chic	205
36. Shattered	209
37. "We Interrupt This Program . . ."	215
38. Miss Gold Digger Meets Mr. Gold.....	223
39. Private Feud and World War	227
40. "Most of You Will Be Killed"	237
41. A Queen and a Princess.....	243
42. Tony.....	249

Part 4

Fantasy vs. Reality (1950–1969)

43. Rio and Reds.....	259
44. Cover-Up.....	265
45. Maybelline, Inc.	269
46. Searching for a Niche.....	277
47. Taking Stock.....	283
48. Jockeying for Position.....	287
49. Cracks in the Dam.....	295
50. A Model Family Member.....	301
51. Reliving the Past.....	307

Part 5

Miss Maybelline Reborn (1970–1979)

52. Many a Wreck.....	317
53. The Wedding(s) of the Year.....	325
54. Deeds and Misdeeds.....	333
55. Trials.....	341
56. The Rise and Fall of Royalty.....	345
57. Glory.....	351
58. Finishing Touches.....	357
59. Show Time.....	361
60. Ashes, Ashes.....	365
Epilogue (1980–Present).....	371
Book Club Discussion Questions.....	375
About the Authors.....	379
Other Books by Bettie Youngs Books Publishing Company.....	381

Part 1

An Idea Is Born
(1912–1926)



One

Inventing Tom Lyle Williams

*M*any a wreck is hid under a good paint job,” my grandmother, “Miss Maybelline,” always told me. That and she loved, and often repeated, Dorothy Lamour’s line, “Glamour is just sex that got civilized.” And so the Maybelline story begins, as it should, with illusion: the illusion of perpetual, larger-than-life beauty. As a fifteen-year-old, my great-uncle Tom Lyle Williams loved movies in a way that was different from that of most people his age. I imagine him poised over the film projector in the back of the nickelodeon where he worked after school for six dollars a week, watching a silent movie flickering in the darkness while a pianist bangs out ragtime melodies in time with the action on the screen. The year is 1911, and even a small farming town like Morganfield, bordering the coalfields of western Kentucky, provides enough business to keep a movie theater thriving.

But for Tom Lyle, as everyone calls him, working in the nickelodeon is not merely a job. He does not just project the films, and he does not just watch them. He is absorbed by them. Through them he can slip into realities utterly unlike Morganfield’s, and the people who dwell there. Mary Pickford in *In the Sultan’s Garden*, so ethereal with her blonde curls and lambent eyes, so captivating in her every expression and gesture . . . it’s a jolt to look

from her to the audience of farmers and their wives, all weary faces and drab clothing.

This is the mystery that holds Tom Lyle spellbound in the darkness: what makes the performers flickering on the screen so much more attractive and fascinating than ordinary people? Even his sisters Mabel and Eva, whom he loves dearly, are so plain in comparison to Mary Pickford. And can any man Tom Lyle has ever seen in person compare in handsomeness to the sleek, square-chinned Wallace Reid or the dapper Dell Henderson? What is their secret, these stars, these larger-than-life miracles? Are they born special, or is it something they learn? And if it is something they learn, can Tom Lyle Williams of Morganfield, Kentucky, acquire that knowledge too?

One day Unk Ile, as I came to call him, would tell me how he studied the film stars: how they stood, how their gazes caught and held the audience's, how they moved their bodies. He noted the clothing they wore and the way they combed their hair, searching for the key that would unlock their secrets.

His neighbors in Morganfield had already pegged him as a hopeless dreamer, a lad who would never amount to anything. And such a shame. Did he not come from one of the better local families? Was his father not both a gentleman farmer and the town sheriff, a tough, no-nonsense fellow more likely to toss a person in jail than discuss the interplay of light and shadow on the silver screen?

And yet it was the art and artifice behind beauty that would one day tear our clan away from its deep Kentucky roots and sweep us into a new world of glamour and fortune. It was the desire to possess this magical power and all that went with it that eventually seduced us all, as surely as if we had been sitting with Unk Ile in the nickelodeon back in 1911.

To this day, I personally identify with Unk Ile more than I do with his younger brother, Preston—my own grandfather. For one thing, Preston died before I was born, but that is not the main reason. I relate to my great-uncle's thoughtful, sensitive nature—which by all accounts was the antithesis of my grandfather's mercurial misbehaviors. Both men were handsome, but again in different ways—one sunlight, one moonlight. My great-grandmother said that of all the children, her fourth, Tom Lyle—with his head of curly blond hair, his twinkling brown eyes, his provocative personality—was the most beautiful.

Dreamer or not, Tom Lyle loved, respected, and wanted to please his parents. It wasn't always easy. Thomas Jefferson "TJ" Williams and his wife, Susan, assumed Tom Lyle would one day become a gentleman farmer like his father and grandfathers, although other acceptable career options included professor or priest. But when Tom Lyle looked in the mirror, he saw none of these things. He saw a boy who didn't match the man living inside his skin. At age fifteen,

he had less muscular definition than his thirteen-year-old brother, Preston, and no facial hair at all. No wonder nobody took him seriously. How could he expect to win the heart of Bennie Gibbs, the only girl in Morganfield as lovely as the actresses on the silver screen? She seemed to like him, holding his gaze a moment longer than necessary when she came into the nickelodeon or when they bumped into each other in town, but that wasn't enough. He needed more. He needed her to know he was special, too. For inspiration, he headed straight for the family Bible, which he slid aside in favor of what was always kept beneath it: the *Sears, Roebuck and Co.* catalogue.

For Tom Lyle, the catalogue offered sojourns into the sophisticated existence he craved, an overview of the desires, habits, and customs of people far more worldly than his neighbors—or himself. The catalogue so fascinated him that he had taught himself to read, at age four, by poring over its product descriptions.

But that wasn't all. The greatest thing about the catalogue was that through the magic of mail order, a small-town boy like Tom Lyle had access to the same products as the most stylish city dweller. He turned to the well-thumbed page advertising motorcycles. He had practically memorized the information by now, but he went over it again. The black Pierce four-cylinder had an appealing aura of menace, but was far too expensive for a nickelodeon operator. The Pope one-cylinder was much cheaper, but it seemed so ordinary. Then there was the Indian two-cylinder: candy-apple red, with the sexy curves of a woman—and inexpensive enough to save for.

Although Tom Lyle was every bit the dreamer townsfolk thought him to be, he also possessed the pragmatism of any hard-bitten farmer. He calculated that he would need two months to save what he needed using his nickelodeon salary alone—too long to suit him. So he supplemented that income with earnings from a business he had started at the age of nine: selling baseball cards. Although he was a fan of the sport and loved the pictures, player information—and advertising copy—on the cards, he mostly viewed his collection as an investment. At age ten he had begun selling off his most prized cards, then used the profits to buy more highly collectible cards and sold those. By his teenage years he had expanded his business to include the trading cards found in cigarette packages, which featured photos of portions of scantily clad women that could be pieced together to form a pinup. He charged the highest prices for a pretty face or an exposed ankle.

Another quality Tom Lyle possessed in volume was determination. In only six weeks, he had amassed the formidable sum of forty dollars. He placed his order for the Indian, and only then admitted the deed to his parents. They scowled and lectured, but did not forbid him to have the motorcycle.

When the Indian finally arrived, gleaming and beautiful, Tom Lyle was

ready. He had already purchased goggles and leather gloves, and borrowed a red-fringed scarf. He brushed his initials onto the cycle's rear fender out in the barn, then climbed onto the saddle. When he kick-started the engine, he stopped being an ordinary small-town boy. On the instant he transformed into a dashing, irresistible hero like those he saw flickering across the movie screen each night.

Chickens squawked and feathers flew as he took the bike for a few turns around the barnyard. Then, with his whole family watching and the red scarf fluttering around his neck, he struck out on the road that ran along the Ohio River. His destination: the home of thirteen-year-old Bennie Gibbs, with her flawless skin and sparkling eyes.

Tom Lyle knew he cut an impressive figure as he sped past Morganfield's red brick courthouse, the library, and the town square with its big American flag flying high. He roared along at a breathtaking thirty-five miles per hour, then accelerated to forty, passing fields of tobacco and hay, fruit orchards and pastures, feeling the glory of the ride down to his toes. In a mere twenty minutes, he covered the twelve miles to Millburn where Bennie lived.

Mrs. Gibbs wouldn't allow her daughter to get on "that contraption," so Tom Lyle parked the cycle and he and Bennie wandered away on foot, holding hands as they strolled past the rosebushes and the massive cottonwood trees. When they kissed for the first time, it was almost an accident.

The afternoon slipped blissfully past, until Tom Lyle noticed the position of the sun. "Oh, gosh, I have to get home! I can't be late for dinner."

"Not even a minute?" Bennie asked.

"Not even a second." He began hauling her back toward her house by the hand. "My father's very strict about the family eating together. I don't want to get thrown in jail."

"*Jail?*"

"Don't forget, Dad's the Morganfield sheriff."

"But *jail?* His own son?"

Tom Lyle laughed. "My brother Preston's already been there twice—once for running away into the woods, and another time for not doing his chores."

"But that's *terrible!*"

"Not for Preston. He just sat around reading dime novels and ignoring Dad's lectures. But I've got a motorcycle to worry about—my folks are already upset I bought it."

They had reached the Gibbs house. "When will I see you again?" Bennie asked Tom Lyle as he released her hand.

"Soon, if I make it home in time for dinner. Pray for me!" And he leaped on the motorcycle and kicked the engine alive.

“Take the old Cummings road!” Bennie yelled through a cloud of blue smoke. “It’s shorter!”

In his rearview mirror, Tom Lyle saw her waving her hankie and blowing him a kiss.

He urged the bike to nearly fifty miles per hour down the tree-lined dirt road, and made good time until he spotted a muddy little gulch cutting across the path ahead. Decision time. He could turn around and find another route, or he could stop and try to muscle the heavy bike across the gap, both at the cost of valuable time.

He opened the throttle as wide as it would go and, as the ditch yawned in front of him, shifted his weight back. He felt the bike sail miraculously free of the ground—and crashed.

When he raised his head from the dust, coughing and groaning, he saw the Indian lying across the road in a battered, mud-smeared heap. He himself had suffered only a few scrapes and bruises, but the bike would not start. He managed to half-walk, half-drag it the remaining distance home, crestfallen, hurting, muddy, and worst of all, late.

TJ Williams was sitting on the porch, a toothpick in his mouth, when Tom Lyle limped into view, pushing the battered, muddy remains of his brand-new motorcycle. Once TJ ascertained that his son was in one piece, he exploded. “Goddamn it, Tommy Lyle! Your mother’s scared half to death! You *will* get rid of that infernal piss-ant death trap.”

“Yes, sir,” Tom Lyle said.

But first he fixed it. Impelled by the same determination that would serve him well throughout his life, he locked himself in the barn with the machine, took it apart, cleaned it, straightened what needed to be straightened, and put it all back together.

When he rolled the resurrected motorcycle out of the barn, his parents gaped.

“That thing still run?” TJ asked.

“Yes, sir, it does. I mean to sell it.”

TJ circled the bike, running his hands over the paint, then slapped Tom Lyle on the shoulder. “Well, I guess you’ve earned the right to keep it if you want.”

Susan shot her husband an alarmed look. “You mean he can keep it *if*. . .”

“*If* you give us your word you won’t pull any more damn-fool stunts on it,” TJ said.

“You have my word,” Tom Lyle said.

That was another thing about Tom Lyle: he was a man of his word. For another year, he rode the bike, a rolling trophy of his persistence. But it did

nothing to enhance his image in Morganfield. Townsfolk gossiped that he had been a show-off ever since he was five and hung up posters billing himself as “Tommy Lyle, the Great Actor-Bat” to advertise the first of many shows he and his little sister, Eva, performed. Instead of praising his energy and gumption, people wrote him off as a dreamer. All the noisy motorbike did was add new pejoratives to the list: flashy, flighty, vain.

Tom Lyle ignored the talk as best he could, but vowed he would show them all someday.

In fact, he was thinking about the future more and more nowadays, as he fell deeper in love with Bennie Gibbs. He bought her trinkets and carved their initials in the big oak tree by the one-room schoolhouse. They began stealing away to meet in secluded places. This was wonderful, but as usual, Tom Lyle wanted more.

Two days before Christmas, the day Bennie turned fourteen, he took her for a cherry cola at the new soda fountain in town, where he presented her with his latest purchase from the Sears catalogue: a ring featuring a ruby in a setting of fourteen karat gold. “This is just the beginning,” he assured her as he slid the ring on her finger. “I’ve got three hundred dollars in savings, and I’m going to turn it into a fortune. I promise.”

Bennie stared in awe at the ring. “I believe you, Tom Lyle, but...” She hesitated. Her parents’ opinion of her boyfriend wasn’t much better than that of most people in town. “But *how?*”

“Like this.” He whipped out a pamphlet. “If I go to Florida and grow vegetables in the winter, I can ship them up north for a huge profit.”

She frowned at the pamphlet. Tom Lyle clutched her hands. “One of these days I’m going to be able to support you, Bennie. You understand what I’m saying?”

She looked back at the ring, and gripped his fingers hard and smiled into his eyes. “I love you, Tom Lyle.”

Although what happened next was never discussed in detail by anyone, including Unk Ile, I can visualize it. Three weeks later, on Tom Lyle’s sixteenth birthday, I imagine him and Bennie sneaking off to an abandoned log cabin or barn. Whatever the exact setting, one thing is certain: on that day, fourteen-year-old Bennie Gibbs gave Tom Lyle the most wonderful present he had ever received.

And several months later, she gave him something else—a piece of news delivered through tears and sobbing: she was pregnant. “I’m so scared, Tommy Lyle. My daddy is a real strict Baptist. He’ll just kill me.”

Tom Lyle the dreamer, bursting with love and pride, did not share her fear. Of course Mr. Gibbs would be upset—a daughter pregnant at fourteen by a six-

teen-year-old Catholic boy! But for the sake of his grandchild, surely he would come around. “Bennie,” Tom Lyle said, “don’t worry. I’ll take care of you and our baby, no matter what.”

For practical advice he turned to his big brother, Noel, always so steady and dependable. Noel’s answer was simple: “You must do the right thing by her, Tommy Lyle.”

This was exactly what Tom Lyle wanted to hear. Without speaking to Bennie’s parents, he asked Bennie to be his wife, and they hopped on the Indian and rode off.

I picture that April day as lovely and sunny. I imagine their euphoria as they reached the ferry that took them across the Ohio River, brown and swollen with spring rains, to Old Shawneetown in Illinois. Bennie knew there was a justice of the peace there because her own mother had gotten married in the historic trading town. It was also far enough away from Morganfield that nobody would know who they were, or how young.

In a three-minute ceremony, the same judge, now eighty-two, who had heard the vows of her parents, pronounced Tom Lyle and Bennie husband and wife.

The marriage didn’t last much longer than the ceremony. When the newlyweds returned to Morganfield, the first place they went was Bennie’s house, to tell her parents about their elopement.

Instead of offering congratulations, Mr. Gibbs snatched up a broomstick. “How dare you marry my daughter without my consent?” he roared, jabbing the young man out of the house. “Do you actually think I’d allow my Bennie to marry a heathen Catholic? Get off my property and don’t ever come back!”

The marriage was quickly annulled, but the other issue was not so easily erased. As Bennie’s swelling belly became more obvious, she was sent off to live with her aunt in Ohio in hopes of keeping her condition a secret. Such hopes proved futile. Soon everyone in Morganfield knew what had happened between Bennie Gibbs and Tom Lyle—and sure enough, scandal ensued. Whenever Tom Lyle entered Morganfield, he encountered cold silence or head-shaking contempt.

He couldn’t believe his situation. How had all his good intentions and studied charm led to such disastrous results? When newspaper headlines blared *TITANIC SINKS*, he half wished he had been aboard the doomed vessel.

Since he no longer made the long trips on his motorcycle to see Bennie, he felt little joy in riding it, and decided to put it up for sale. After several weeks without an offer, he realized that nobody in Morganfield could afford the fifty dollars he was asking—or else nobody wanted the bike because it was *his*.

One day at the barber shop, glumly paging through a copy of *Popular Mechanics*, he came to the classified ads, and had an idea—an idea no one had ever tried before, as far as he knew. Rushing home, he penned a fifteen-word “motorcycle for sale” ad and sent it to the magazine, along with a dollar fifty to pay for it.

After that he checked the mailbox on a daily basis, certain his brainstorm would pay off in no time.

Nothing.

One evening, after he had sat through dinner stewing about the lack of response to his ad, he became aware of how silent the table had become, and looked up to see TJ and Susan ushering the other children out of the room. When his parents came back and took their seats, TJ—who, as both sheriff and the county Tax Collector had lost an eye in a shootout over property rights some years earlier—popped out the replacement glass eye, polished it on his sleeve, and put it back in said, “This scandal about Bennie and the baby is hurting the rest of our family, Tom Lyle.”

Tom Lyle hung his head. “I know, Papa. I’m sorry.”

TJ sounded weary rather than angry. “Our people came over on the Mayflower. My granddaddy Josiah was a magistrate while he farmed these five hundred acres. We’ve got a tradition to uphold.”

Tom Lyle realized his mother had the Bible on her lap, opened to her family tree. Tears trembled in her eyes. “Tom Lyle, I can’t hold my head up in town anymore. I hear whispers wherever I go. We all do.”

He glanced back and forth between his parents. “What are you saying?”

TJ leaned forward. “Son, we think it’s best if you leave home. Leave Morganfield. Your brother Noel got himself a good job up in Chicago; you could go up there and stay with him, find your way up there.”

The rest of the lecture was a blur. The injustice of being exiled filled Tom Lyle with shame, despair, and rage unlike anything he had ever felt before. Hadn’t he done the honorable thing, marrying Bennie with every intention of supporting her and their child? Was it his fault her parents had stripped him of that honor? Was it his fault people liked to wag their tongues?

He rose to his feet. “If you want me to leave, I’ll leave.”

Then something happened that would change the course of my great uncle’s life: his advertisement for the Indian got a response. And not just one, but a dozen over the course of a few days, each envelope contained a money order for fifty dollars. A dozen orders! Of course he would have to return all but one, but the incredible fact remained: he could have sold twelve motorcycles with that single ad.

He dug out the pamphlet about Florida produce that he had shown Bennie and lost himself in its vivid portrayal of profits to be made. Photos showed crowds of bundled-up Northerners waiting in line at the market for so-called “late” vegetables grown in the Deep South. His parents wanted him to leave? Fine. But forget Chicago and some dreary railroad job like his brother’s—he’d go to Florida and get rich.

Anger and resentment solidified into resolve. Counting his savings and the income from the bike, he had enough stake money to make a success of himself. Then he would win his Bennie back and be the husband and father he knew he could be.

The kind of father who would never send his son away in shame.

At the far end of his first solo train trip, Tom Lyle stepped into the Florida heat and promptly used all his savings to purchase a vegetable tract outside Orlando. He persuaded a local fifteen-year-old boy to help him cultivate his first crop, and for several months he worked hard at farming—the one thing he had been certain he did not want to do. But it would be worth it. When he returned to Morganfield in glory, that would show the Gibbs family that he was a worthy son-in-law—and everyone else that he was not a ne’er-do-well dreamer.

The crops were growing beautifully when he received a letter from Ohio announcing that Cecil Anderson Williams had been born to Bennie Gibbs on September 9, 1912. Tom Lyle was delighted to see that despite her father’s objections, Bennie had put “Williams” on the baby’s birth certificate.

A month later, when the frosts set in up north, he and his assistant harvested their crop. That was when Tom Lyle discovered that the cost of shipping produce up north was prohibitively high. He couldn’t pay for shipping and still make a profit.

He lost everything.

Returning penniless to Morganfield took all the emotional reserves he could muster, but his parents seemed to think his banishment had done its job. His father discussed plans for Tom Lyle to help run the farm and possibly even become a deputy sheriff in a few years.

Tom Lyle wasn’t too keen on either idea—except that it meant he could be near Bennie and their son. That made it worth considering.

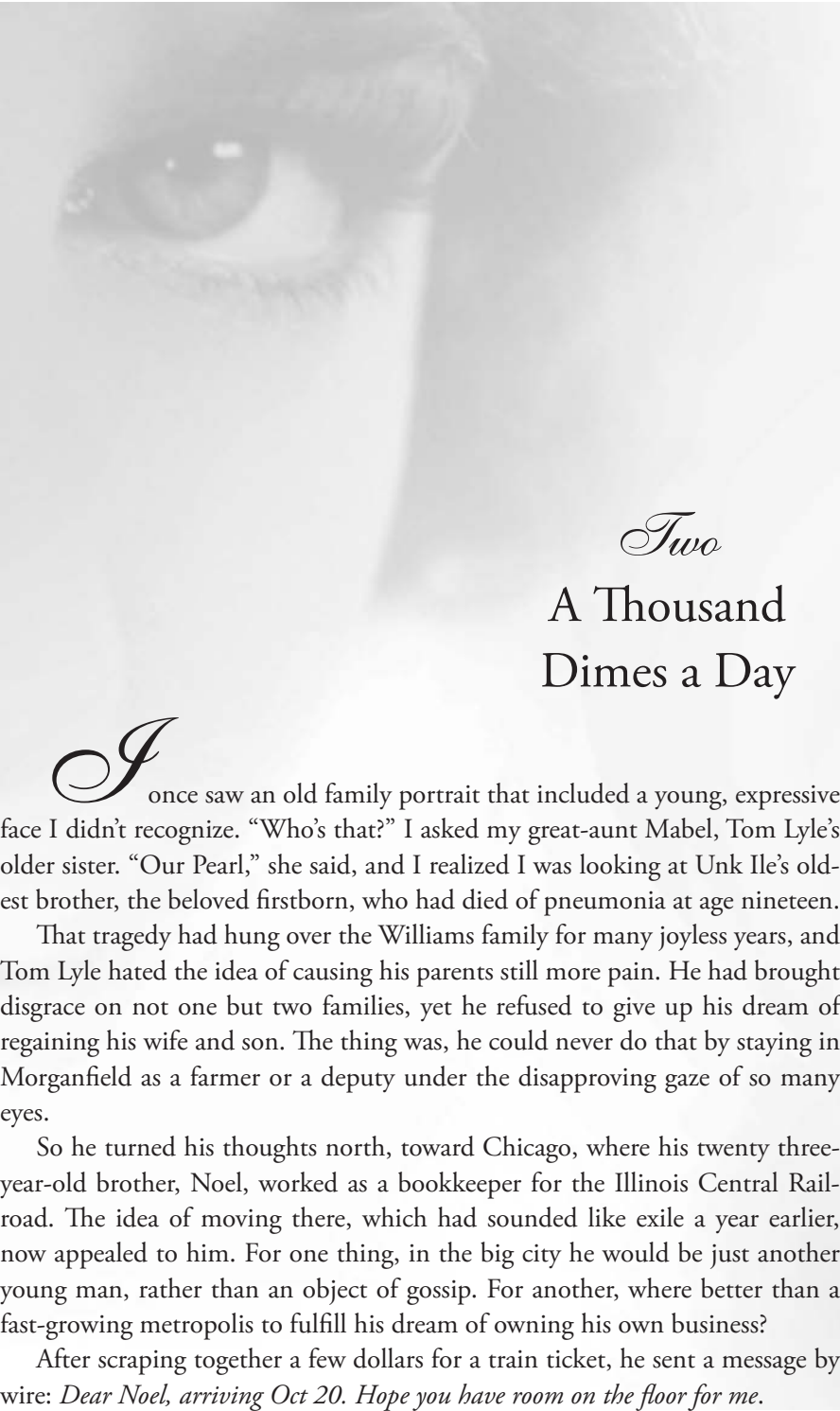
He had finally met Cecil for the first time, through a bit of romantic subterfuge that defeated his ban from the Gibbs farm. A friend of his named Lucy arranged for Bennie to come over to visit for a day. Bennie didn’t know that Tom Lyle was also on his way, walking three miles through the rain carrying a

bunch of flowers. When he knocked on his friend's door, Lucy opened it—and there behind her was beautiful Bennie, rocking and breast-feeding their baby in the parlor.

Tom Lyle dropped to his knees in front of her. “You look like a goddess.”

Bennie sobbed as she swaddled the baby and held him out to his father.

Surely the love manifested in their child would bind them together forever.



Two
A Thousand
Dimes a Day

I once saw an old family portrait that included a young, expressive face I didn't recognize. "Who's that?" I asked my great-aunt Mabel, Tom Lyle's older sister. "Our Pearl," she said, and I realized I was looking at Unk Ile's oldest brother, the beloved firstborn, who had died of pneumonia at age nineteen.

That tragedy had hung over the Williams family for many joyless years, and Tom Lyle hated the idea of causing his parents still more pain. He had brought disgrace on not one but two families, yet he refused to give up his dream of regaining his wife and son. The thing was, he could never do that by staying in Morganfield as a farmer or a deputy under the disapproving gaze of so many eyes.

So he turned his thoughts north, toward Chicago, where his twenty three-year-old brother, Noel, worked as a bookkeeper for the Illinois Central Railroad. The idea of moving there, which had sounded like exile a year earlier, now appealed to him. For one thing, in the big city he would be just another young man, rather than an object of gossip. For another, where better than a fast-growing metropolis to fulfill his dream of owning his own business?

After scraping together a few dollars for a train ticket, he sent a message by wire: *Dear Noel, arriving Oct 20. Hope you have room on the floor for me.*

Ironically, TJ and Susan were now opposed to him leaving Morganfield, but Tom Lyle begged until they gave in. He promised his mother that if things didn't work out, he would return and perhaps become a priest.

So it was that Tom Lyle Williams made the long trip to the shore of Lake Michigan, riding the train along with hordes of other rural Americans hoping to find better-paying jobs in the face of fierce competition.

The mammoth train station in Chicago connected people, livestock, and products from coast to coast and border to border, and was so overwhelming that Tom Lyle almost melted with relief when Noel met him at the platform. They walked fifteen blocks to an old boarding house situated between the West Side and the rough South Side. The brothers had to cross from one sidewalk to the other to avoid the beggars, drunks, con artists, and hookers who loitered in alleys or worked the streets. As Tom Lyle looked around in astonishment, Noel explained that by that year of 1912, the population of Chicago had ballooned to almost 1.7 million, with new apartment buildings and boarding houses springing up all over.

"But you'll be sharing my room for now, little brother," he said.

Noel's boarding house skirted a slum of overcrowded tenement buildings, flagged with ragged gray laundry, cluttered with refuse, and rife with the stink of inadequate sewage disposal.

"Did you hear Teddy Roosevelt got shot a few days ago?" Noel said as they started up a narrow staircase. "That happened not too far from here."

"Is it true his glasses saved his life?"

"The bullet hit the case in his pocket, and didn't go very far into his chest. Roosevelt went ahead and finished his speech before he let them take him the hospital. Now there's a real man!"

Finally they reached the fifth floor, and Noel opened the door to his dollar-fifty-a-week accommodations. "It's not much; in fact it's the cheapest room in the house. Toilet down the hall. Baths cost twenty-five cents at a bathhouse down the block."

"It's fine," Tom Lyle said. He dropped his satchel on the floor he would be sleeping on. It was an improvement on the dirt floor of his tool shed in Florida.

The next day he looked through the jobs section of the newspaper and circled a single item:

MONTGOMERY WARD AND COMPANY
order-filler, \$8.00 a week

Another auspicious decision.

I like to think Montgomery Ward hired Unk Ile because he impressed somebody there with his familiarity with mail-order catalogues. In any case, it was the ideal job for the man who had been taught to read by Sears and Roebuck. Founder Aaron Montgomery Ward had launched the revolutionary idea of a mail-order catalogue with a single page in 1872. Forty years later, when Tom Lyle hired on, the Ward catalogue had thickened to 540 pages. Sometimes referred to as the “Wish Book,” it set Tom Lyle’s mind spinning around the idea of creating his own mail-order business. He studied the language of the product descriptions as avidly as if he had to pass a test on them.

Soon he was able to send Bennie and the baby two of the eight dollars he earned each week. The rest he saved, even walking the three miles to and from Montgomery Ward each day to avoid a ten-cent trolley fare. He often skipped meals, and he refused to buy an overcoat despite Chicago’s knife-sharp winter winds.

Noel shook his head. “You look like a rake.”

“Noel, I plan to start my own mail-order business, and that takes money. I’m willing to go without until I achieve my goal. I did it before.”

“And look where it got you. This time you won’t even have a pile of vegetables to eat if things go wrong. Seriously, Tom Lyle, you have to learn to be more practical.”

“I’d rather be rich,” Tom Lyle said.

When the holidays arrived, Noel went back to Morganfield to visit his sweetheart, Frances, but Tom Lyle chose to remain in Chicago. He wasn’t ready to face the townspeople down there. Not yet.

One day, as he hung around the advertising department at Montgomery Ward, he met a young man named Emery Shaver, who wrote ad copy part time while studying literature at the University of Chicago. His ultimate goal, he said, was to become a playwright. Tom Lyle found him fascinating: charming, intelligent, and self-assured—a born salesman, the kind of man who could talk a shell off a turtle’s back. Barely twenty, Emery was dapper in style and dress, and spoke with the warm, smooth tones Tom Lyle had always imagined film stars must have in real life. Moreover, he shared Tom Lyle’s driving ambition and belief that hard work would lead to success.

Tom Lyle shared his own plans with his new friend. “Sounds wonderful,” Emery said. “Do you have a typewriter?”

“A typewriter?”

“How else are you going to write your own mail-order catalogue?”

“Good question,” Tom Lyle said, almost as amused at his own naiveté as Emery was. He promptly invested part of his savings in a secondhand typewriter

and taught himself how to use it. Then, after negotiating wholesale prices, he attempted to sell imported fifty-cent safety razors, risqué postcards, and other novelty items through individual advertisements placed in various publications.

For the next two years he experimented with buying and selling all kinds of inexpensive things, but none of them caught on.

“Well, Tommy Lyle, like I always told you, it was a crackpot scheme anyway,” Noel said. He was sick of having their tiny floor space crowded with the junk Tom Lyle called “inventory.” “Please don’t waste any more of your hard-earned money on these frivolous ideas. Take a job with the railroad. Start at the bottom and work your way up. The railroad business is booming and will only get better.”

But Tom Lyle refused to give up on his dream. By now he had located a wholesale company that sold easily-mailed novelties: comic pictures, postcards, and trick items like sneezing powder and itching powder. He purchased samples of twenty different items and had a pamphlet-sized catalogue printed. Then he wrote a one-inch ad:

Fascinating pictures, post cards, tricks, novelties, etc.
Send dime for samples and catalogue.

This time he gambled all his savings—as well as some of Noel’s—to place the ad in a mail-order magazine called *The Household Guest*.

“You’re insane,” Noel said. “And so am I for backing you up. I have the feeling I’m going to regret this.”

For the next five days, Tom Lyle lived to check the mail—and then, on the sixth day, a dozen letters arrived at the boarding house, each containing a silver dime.

“I don’t believe it,” Noel said. But he was smiling.

In thirty days, Tom Lyle received enough dimes to repeat the advertisement and still make a fifty-dollar profit. He promptly placed the same ad in other mail-order publications, and the influx of dimes increased. Within a couple of weeks he received almost two thousand letters—and two thousand dimes. Some customers also ordered additional items from the small catalogue he sent out with every filled order.

Tom Lyle felt thrilled; perhaps he had finally found his niche in the world. He placed still more ads. The flow of income kept increasing.

He and Noel moved from the cheapest room in the house to two-bunk accommodations.

In 1914, at the age of eighteen and having been in Chicago for two years, Tom Lyle Williams was a serious businessman, making real money. He gave his notice to Montgomery Ward and asked Emery Shaver to join him in his new novelty-catalogue business. Emery agreed and, in celebration of leaving “the Ward,” suggested they go to Weeghman Park and watch the opening game of the Chicago Federal League baseball team, the Chicago Whales. Tom Lyle, who had taken almost no time off since arriving in Chicago, was delighted by the invitation and eager to see some of the athletes he had admired on trading cards.

Emery picked him up at the boarding house in what he described as his father’s new car, a Packard.

“Whew!” Tom Lyle admired the hood ornament. “What’s your dad do for a living?”

“Real estate investment. He always has the best car in Chicago.”

“I’m not used to such luxury.” Tom Lyle climbed into the passenger seat and inhaled the new leather smell. “But I’d sure love to *get* used to it.”



Three
A Secret
from the Harem

*I*n 1915, Tom Lyle wired his sister Mabel to come to Chicago and help him run his budding business. This was no longer the surprising request it would have once been. Women were beginning to defy their traditional roles, taking jobs outside the home, holding suffragist rallies, flying airplanes across the English Channel, redefining themselves in every way.

Plus, Tom Lyle suspected Mabel wanted out of the family home almost as much as he had.

He was right, although her reasons were very different from what his had been. In truth, Mabel was a bit plain and not getting younger; she feared she would become an old maid if she stayed any longer in Morganfield, where she had already met all the potential husbands.

In August, she moved to Chicago and began helping fill orders, which by then were coming in at the rate of a thousand a day—so fast that Tom Lyle had already hired five additional girls to handle the money and ship out postcards and novelties.

Mabel calculated that one thousand dimes a day came to \$36,500 a year—the equivalent to well over half a million dollars today—and suggested to her brothers that they move out of the boarding house to an apartment where she

could cook for them as well as fulfill her other duties. Tom Lyle, always frugal, preferred to stay where they were a little longer so he could put every dime he made back into advertising. Mabel agreed to the delay on two conditions: "I'd like have a room of my own, and I'd like to make you some of Mama's home cooking on a real stove once in a while."

The owner of the boarding house, Mrs. O'Brien, granted Mabel access to the stove, provided she help prepare supper for the other boarders on Sunday afternoons after church. Mabel was happy to oblige, but asked another favor in return: to ride with Mrs. O'Brien to the Old St. Patrick's Catholic Church each Sunday.

After a couple of weeks, Mabel, always the virtuous sister, had her two brothers in church on their knees thanking God for their blessings. In Morganfield, the Williamses may have been ostracized for being Catholic, but in Chicago they fit right in.

Mabel also had an unexpected passion. Although she would leave the room when Noel and Tom Lyle discussed politics and world events, such as the ongoing Turkish massacre of the Armenians or the sinking of the Lusitania by a German U-boat, she was quick to discuss Lillian Gish and her latest film, *Birth of a Nation*. In order to keep up to date on the latest dish on Hollywood personalities, she regularly read the lurid gossip magazines of the time.

Ironically, it was Mabel's enthusiasm for this hobby that set the stage for the next big change.

One morning, Mabel was making cake frosting by melting sugar in a pan on the stove. As she leaned over to stir it, a flame shot up into her face, singeing away her eyebrows and eyelashes. She chipped ice from the ice block and pressed it to her burning forehead until the pain abated, then stared dejectedly at her reflection in the looking glass. The finely-shaped brows and dark eyelashes that had given definition to the unrefined lines of her face were gone. She looked like an unfinished mannequin. How long would it take the hairs to grow back? What if they never did?

"Well," she said to the mirror, "your life is ruined. No man will want you now. Mother will be so happy to know you'll soon be entering a convent."

But Mabel was as plucky and clever as any of the Williams clan. That evening, when Tom Lyle looked in on her to say goodnight, he grimaced at the scorched smell in her room. Then he looked closer. His sister sat in front of her vanity, burning a piece of cork with a match. As Tom Lyle watched, she collected the ash in the palm of her left hand.

"What're you doing, Sis?"

“It’s a harem secret,” she said, scooping a bit of petroleum jelly out of a jar with the tip of her right index finger and stirring it into the ash. “I read about it in *Photoplay* magazine.” Using the fingertip, she carefully dabbed sooty goo onto her sparse brows and the stubs of her eyelashes. “Vaseline is good for everything. It soothes burns and will help my eyebrows and lashes grow back faster. Meanwhile, the ash and a little coal dust make what hairs are left show up better. See?”

She turned to face her brother. Tom Lyle’s mouth fell open. The charcoal eyebrows and lashes next to his sister’s porcelain skin made for a dramatic and lovely contrast. With no more than a blob of Vaseline, some incinerated cork and a bit of coal dust, Mabel had not only resurrected her appearance, she had *improved* it.

“Your eyes are beautiful,” he said. “They make you look like Gloria Swanson or . . . Lillian Gish!”

Why hadn’t he realized this before? The magic key to the beauty of Hollywood goddesses was not their figures or their wardrobes or their smiles. It was their eyes.

The next morning, Tom Lyle set out to learn what sort of eye-enhancing products already existed in the marketplace. His interest was not casual. He knew that he could sell only so much sneezing powder before interest trailed off; in fact, orders of his novelties were already thinning. He needed a new product to market, and the transformation of Mabel from plain sister to glamorous woman had fired his imagination.

But he quickly discovered that women were just beginning to accept wearing cosmetics of any kind, after shunning them during the prim Victorian era. Creams and powders were fairly common, but products to enhance the beauty of eyes?

“Oh, noooo! No, indeed,” said the woman selling beauty products at Marshall Fields and Co. “We don’t sell that sort of thing.”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Tom Lyle said, “but why not?”

“Because no proper woman would ask for them.”

Tom Lyle had his doubts about that, but thanked her and moved on. He discovered the existence of a crude colored wax that was heated and stuck on the lashes to create a beaded effect, but this product was used only on stage. In one store, a woman behind the beauty counter whispered that she knew someone who made a “decoction” from ground walnut hulls, based on a recipe from the charmingly named book, *Homely Girls*, by Sarah Jane Pierce.

In short, Tom Lyle confirmed that the market for eye beauty products was wide open. The problem was that no such products existed, unless you counted secret concoctions bubbling on stovetops across America.

Lying in bed at night, he envisioned a mail-order advertisement featuring a photo of Mabel with her alluring new eyes, alongside a bold slogan like *A magic potion for more beautiful eyes* or *Making any man want you*. He hadn't quite found the right angle yet, but he would. He was inspired. His sister had made herself beautiful through artifice. She would be the muse of his company's new product line—because if plain Mabel could do it, any woman could.

He was ready to start shipping this new product immediately, if only it existed. The fact that it didn't exist was only a minor obstacle.

He would just have to create the product himself.

Ablaze with his vision, Tom Lyle skipped a day of regular work to experiment with Mabel's initial smudgy concoction. His friend Carl had a chemistry set, and, surrounded by dozens of test tubes and Petri dishes, Tom Lyle crouched for hours in Carl's dank, uncomfortable basement, mixing and testing different versions of what he quickly dubbed the "eye dye." The best mixture included Vaseline and a little cottonseed oil, which congealed quickly when mixed with any sort of powder, such as something from the chemistry set called "carbon black." A drop of safflower oil provided sheen.

At last he had a product—or so he thought, until Mabel dabbed it on her lashes, and it ran straight down into her eyes, with painful results.

Frustrated yet more determined than ever, Tom Lyle decided to take the train to Detroit to visit a wholesale drug manufacturing company called Park-Davis. Noel and Emery went with him and watched as Tom Lyle described to a chemist what he wanted: a fine, pure product that would be beneficial for eyebrows and eyelashes.

Several weeks later, the chemist submitted to Tom Lyle a sample of refined white petroleum mixed with several fine oils and a touch of perfume—a cosmetic meant primarily to stimulate hair follicles to grow, without irritating the eyes. There was no dark coloration in this substance, but Tom Lyle noticed that it did add a distinct sheen to the little hairs, helping to brighten the eyes and make them sparkle.

He placed an order for ten pounds.

The production facilities for repackaging this new product into individual-sized containers consisted of a teapot on the boarding house stove. The three members of the Chicago Williamses melted batches of raw material in the pot and poured it into small aluminum containers, which they labeled "Lash-Brow-Ine," a combination of syllables from "eyelash," "eyebrow," and "Vaseline."

Tom Lyle finally had a product to sell, and a name for it. Now all he needed was the funding to launch his new venture. Unfortunately, his own funds were tied up in unsold novelty inventory, not to mention ongoing payroll for Emery,

Mabel, and the mail-order workers, as well as living expenses and support payments to Bennie.

He asked Noel to lend him five hundred dollars, but his brother shook his head. "Sorry, little brother, but I've been saving for five years to marry Frances. I can't risk that now."

"I understand," Tom Lyle said. And he did.

But of course he had no intention of giving up on Lash-Brow-Ine.

At Thanksgiving that year, the Williams family homestead in Kentucky welcomed a slightly expanded contingent from Chicago: not only Noel, Mabel, and Tom Lyle, but Tom Lyle's charming new friend, Emery. The meal proceeded around conversation about life in Chicago, what various relatives were doing, the latest news from the ongoing war in Europe—anything but business. Although TJ and Susan were impressed with how far their wayward middle son had come in only a couple of years, business was simply never discussed at the Williams table.

It was only after dinner that the matter of funding for Tom Lyle's prospective new enterprise arose.

Noel exchanged a glance with his fiancée, Frances, and held her hand. "I wish I could help you out, Tommy Lyle, but we're ready to get married now. We don't want to put it off forever."

Frances looked troubled. "I know a woman whose husband divorced her for wearing makeup. Aren't you encouraging women to look like music-hall performers or..." She lowered her voice. "... prostitutes?"

Tom Lyle smiled. "Is that what you would call Mabel?"

"Goodness, no! I heard that story about the fire and all, and I understand why she did what she did, but that's different."

"Is it?" Tom Lyle slipped a small glass bottle out of his pocket and held it up so everyone could see the label: *Mascaro*. "Men use this stuff to dye their sideburns and mustaches, and no one objects. So why shouldn't women do the same with their eyebrows and lashes? Can't everyone use a little help sometimes?" He leaned toward Frances. "What do you think of Lillian Gish?"

"Oh, she's very beautiful. But Tom Lyle, she's a movie star."

"Exactly. A movie star. How much of her beauty is her own, and how much comes from lighting and makeup? What if I told you every woman could have a bit of that beauty in her own life? Is that so wrong?"

Again his hand dipped into a pocket, this time producing a small round tin labeled Lash-Brow-Ine. "Try this, Frances. It's the new product we want to take to market."

"Oh, I don't know. . . "

"I'll try it!" cried Eva, the youngest of the clan. She had just turned fourteen, and though her mother forbade it, hid a movie magazine or two under her mattress.

"Certainly not," said TJ.

Mabel took Frances by the hand. "I'll help you put it on, Frances. I'm wearing some right now."

"I thought your eyes looked awfully nice." Frances glanced at Noel.

He sighed. "Sweetheart, when Tom Lyle gets his teeth set in something, he doesn't let it go. Better get this over with."

Frances disappeared upstairs with the Williams sisters.

While they were gone, Tom Lyle asked his father how things were going in Morganfield. He had lost his interest in strutting around the little town to demonstrate how far he had come, although he still resented being barred from visiting Bennie and Cecil at her parents' home.

TJ shrugged. "Susan and I are thinking about selling the farm."

"What?" Tom Lyle didn't have to point out that the five hundred acres represented everything his father valued: continuity, legacy, family.

"Times are changing," TJ said. "Farming's getting mechanized, turning into a different kind of business. Prices are falling. I have a bad feeling about the way things are going around here."

Across the table, Tom Lyle's younger brother, Preston, squirmed and scowled. "I can hunt and fish for food if we need it."

"Grand idea," TJ said without looking at him. "But—"

He broke off as giggling at the top of the stairs announced the return of the sisters and Frances. As they came down the steps, Frances blushing, Noel had to smile. It was true; although his fiancée insisted she had dabbed on only a little Lash-Brow-Ine, the sheen from the jelly really did make her eyes sparkle in a remarkable way.

"Doesn't she look beautiful?" Eva cried. "I want to try it!"

"Eva!" TJ said.

"Take the money, Tom Lyle," Frances said. "I don't think we'll have to delay our wedding by a single minute."

Noel laughed. "See? I told you." He turned to Tom Lyle. "Okay, little brother, count us in. If anyone can make this work, it's you."

At only nineteen years of age, Tom Lyle already had the ideal experience and setup for developing his new product. His knowledge of inventory management proved useful in ordering raw ingredients and product containers. His mail-order team was already in place, and his eye for advertising assured product appeal and visibility.

They added Mabel's picture to the little tin, and used Noel and Frances's wedding money to purchase a trademark on a company name: Maybell Laboratories, chosen in honor of Mabel and her "secret of the harem" self-treatment.

Tom Lyle and Emery designed a one-and-a-half inch ad, and placed it in *Photoplay* magazine. The ad featured an illustration of an alluring eye along with the fateful words:

BEAUTIFY YOUR LASHES WITH LASH-BROW-INE
SEND 25 CENTS

As soon as the issue appeared on newsstands, quarters started pouring into the company's coffers. Thousands of quarters. In fact, returns from the first ad made such a substantial profit that Tom Lyle branched out with ads in *Pictorial Review*, *Delineator*, *the Police Gazette*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Together, he and Emery worked out additional copy that included the line, "Your lashes will grow longer and fuller."

They didn't realize that this claim crossed an unseen line—ignorance that would later have dire consequences.

Each day Tom Lyle and Noel made several trips to the train station, hauling heavy mailbags by wheelbarrow because the post office would no longer tote the commercial volume of weighty bags. Soon the brothers and Mabel moved out of the boarding house and into a little office and work space over a three bedroom apartment on the South Side of Chicago, at a cost of fifteen dollars a month. Although the accommodations improved, they continued to do almost all the work—taking orders, filling boxes, mailing packages—themselves.

It was time to bring in the rest of family.

Noel and Frances were married on November 16, 1916. The Kentucky farm sold shortly thereafter, and the rest of the family moved up to Chicago, where everyone pitched in to help with Tom Lyle's burgeoning business. Noel, his \$500 investment more than repaid, quit his job with the railroad and devoted himself to the new company full-time. Mabel had already secured her place managing the mail-order workers. Eva enjoyed removing the coins stuck to postcards, stuffing packages, and shipping orders to customers. TJ, who had also served as a tax collector back in Morganfield, took over some of the book-keeping duties.

Only Preston resisted, claiming to hate the city, hate the warehouse, hate the work.

And there was a lot of work. After nearly four years in Chicago, Tom Lyle

had created a mail-order business likely to produce a gross volume of \$300,000 in the coming year. As TJ had said, times were changing—but in this case, in a good way. The movie stars in *Photoplay* made vanity appealing to the demure Gibson Girl, who was beginning to gain her own sense of style. Fashionable clothing had arrived in America with Coco Chanel's designs for the everyday woman. And now the importance of enhancing the eyes was becoming recognized as well.

At last Tom Lyle felt financially secure enough to buy a car that would more than rival one that Emery's father might own. In those days, anyone with enough money could go to the factory and design a one-of-a-kind car made to order, and that was what he and Noel did. They took the train to Detroit and visited the Paige automobile factory, builders of "the most beautiful car in America." There, Tom Lyle designed a convertible with a sleek fish-tail back end to set it apart from the run-of-the-mill, square-ended cars seen on the road every day. His preference for elegant, personalized cars would prove to be one area where Tom Lyle, in most ways a very frugal man, chose to indulge himself throughout his life.

By now, he could afford it. Beauty was becoming big business, and he was one of the first people to capitalize on it. He created a document called *The Maybell Booklet, The Woman Beautiful*, containing hints on the art of becoming more attractive—and, of course, a list of Maybell preparations that would aid in that art.

The options expanded as new, scientifically developed products rolled out of the Park Davis lab: Maybell Lily of the Valley face powder; Maybell Beauty Cream; Odor-Ine Toilet Lotion, an early antiperspirant and deodorant whose ad read: *Every woman of refinement should always have a bottle of "ODOR-INE" on her dressing table.*

But Lash-Brow-Ine remained the heart of the product line. Women wrote letters endorsing it as a "splendid preparation for stimulating and promoting the growth of eye lashes and eye brows." Even men jumped on the bandwagon, using Lash-Brow-Ine in an attempt to stimulate hair growth on their balding heads.

And therein lay a problem: at that time, hair growth could not be stimulated by any known means. But people believed it could be, and Tom Lyle and Emery did not hesitate to capitalize on the public perception that Lash-Brow-Ine had this magical property. To bolster the claim, they advertised endorsements from the likes of Professor Allyn of the famous McClure-Westfield Laboratories. Those were the Wild West days of advertising, when embellishing the truth to catch the public's eye was standard practice, especially in a brand-new arena of business like so-called "purchased beauty."

But then the Bureau of Chemistry (precursor of the FDA) announced a crackdown on exactly these kinds of unsupported advertising promises—and identified Lash-Brow-Ine as one of the snake-oil products under investigation.

The effect was immediate and profound: the public stopped buying Lash-Brow-Ine. Tom Lyle was caught unprepared. He had never before manufactured a product of his own, and wasn't aware of the power Washington wielded. Now all his working capital was tied up in raw ingredients and inventory for a product no one wanted, and his usual advertising approaches were useless, if not illegal. To his shock, he found himself in the same situation he had been in down in Florida: surrounded by a product he couldn't sell.

He was broke.

Book Club Discussion Questions

- Tom Lyle Williams, the founder of Maybelline, was an exemplar of the American virtues of thrift, determination, and hard work. But later, most members of his family became wealthy only because they were members of his family. How were they affected by turning into overnight millionaires? What is the significance of the fact that Tom Lyle himself tried to guide his family toward conservative financial planning? Have you ever come into money, and, if so, how did it affect you?
- As a young man, Tom Lyle was rejected by his community and, for a while, by his own family. How did this shape his determination and entrepreneurial spirit? How did it drive him to Chicago? If he had been accepted by the people of Morganfield, Kentucky—including the parents of his first love, Bennie Gibbs—what sort of man would he likely have become? How would you react to being ostracized by your peers?
- More than once, Tom Lyle lost everything. He lost out on living with his child and young bride. He lost his investment in his first business and, later, everything he had invested in Maybelline. How and why did he battle his way back to the top? What qualities drove him to persist, no matter what? Have you ever been knocked down and had to fight your way back up? Could you do it as many times as Tom Lyle did?
- From an early age, Tom Lyle worshipped beauty and perfection, standards that permeated the fabric of his business and his family. While the desire for beauty brought in a fortune, it came with a price. How did the philosophy “beauty hurts” play out in the lives of various generations of Maybelline women—Evelyn, Pauline, and Sharrie? How did seeking to become and remain beautiful affect

their interactions with family, friends, and themselves? Do you agree with that philosophy, or do you believe that beauty is only skin deep?

- Despite pressure from all sides, Tom Lyle's brother Preston was the only member of the immediate family reluctant to become part of the business. What prompted his resistance? How did it play out as the years went by? If you were in a similar situation, would you join the business? Why or why not?
- In many important respects, Tom Lyle Williams's personal code of conduct came down to two words: family first. It led him to dispense and withhold power and protection based on blood ties. How did this affect the behavior of his brother Preston and his sister-in-law Evelyn? How did it affect the way he structured and ran the Maybelline Company? Were any nonrelatives ever treated like family? If so, why them? Do you believe that family is everything, or should other factors be taken into consideration?
- Preston and Evelyn's relationship was tempestuous, to say the least—yet, in the end, they both expressed love for one another. In what ways were they similar enough to be attracted to each other for all those years and through all that adversity, and in what ways did their differences pull them apart? How do you think you would react in a similar love/hate relationship?
- As she ages, Evelyn repeats several times that all she wants in return for the things she had done for her family members is their “love and respect,” while her son disputes this, saying that the family has paid dearly for everything she has given them. Who do you think is correct? Might they both be? Have you ever questioned the motives of someone who has done something for you, and if so, why?
- Modern psychologists define someone suffering from narcissistic personality disorder as being extremely preoccupied with, and having an exaggerated sense of, oneself. Other symptoms include needing constant attention and admiration, disregarding the feelings of others, having trouble maintaining healthy relationships, taking advantage of others to achieve one's own goals, and expressing disdain for anyone seen as inferior. To what extent does Evelyn exhibit these traits? To what extent do any other members of the Williams clan? Have you ever been negatively affected by someone exhibiting these traits, and if so, how did you deal with it?

- How and why did Evelyn end up moving to Hot Springs? To what extent was the move a reaction against her own family and to what extent a genuine desire to start a new life on her own terms? What kind of life did she ultimately choose to create in Hot Springs, and why? Would you have done the same things? What would you do differently?
- In Hot Springs, Evelyn remade herself as Miss Maybelline. How much of this transformation was actually new, compared to how she had projected herself in Chicago and Los Angeles? To what extent do you believe she was promoting the beloved company that had given her riches and power, and how much to promoting herself at any cost?
- Evelyn's public persona in Hot Springs earned her the dislike of powerful people. Why? In what ways was Evelyn different from the many hustlers and entrepreneurs who came to that city in search of fame and fortune? Suppose you were warned to get out of town or else. Would you leave or stick it out?
- One of Evelyn's goals toward the end of her life was to bring her family to the new town that she seemed to rule. What were her motivations for trying to draw her grandchildren, in particular, to Hot Springs? Which of the kids were interested, and why? Would bribery work on you?
- The book proposes that Evelyn's death was the result of arson, which was one of the immediate conclusions of investigators. Later, the theory that the blaze began with an unattended pot in the kitchen became the dominant official explanation. Which theory seems more likely, given the circumstances? Why do you think the official explanation changed after state authorities stepped in? What reasons would authorities have to turn a murder into an accident?

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