

Pearl Passion

by Sally Thornton

Last year I wrote a whole series in Village Connect on *Birthstones*, but as there was always so much to say I had difficulty keeping to just two pages. So this month, I would like to make it an excuse to take another look at the birthstone for June: the Pearl.

The *pearl* has long been loved, praised, desired and flaunted. Cleopatra wore *pearls* and Helen of Troy probably had a classic double string tucked away somewhere.

There is something in the lustre, the smoothness, the weight, the balance of *pearls* which connects with the innermost self appreciation of every woman. Many will put aside other indulgences to enjoy the beauty of *pearl* jewellery; a few will deprive themselves in other areas to satisfy their love of *pearls* whilst one lady sacrificed hugely to own a particular necklace. So let me tell you the story of Maisie Plant and her *pearls*.

Mae Cadwell Manwaring Plant, better known as Maisie, was born in 1878. Maisie met Morton Plant, the son of Henry Plant the railroad and property tycoon, at a reception in one of his father's hotels. Morton was immediately stricken by Maisie and decided that he must marry her. The fact that Maisie was already married did not deter Morton and a reputed \$8 million settlement was made to free Maisie from her existing matrimonial commitments, enabling Morton and Maisie to marry in 1914. As a wedding gift, Morton gave Maisie a Neo-Renaissance Mansion on New York's Fifth Avenue.

A year later, Cartier was to take an exhibition of his jewellery to New York where Maisie was to set eyes on a double string of natural *pearls* said to be the finest in the western world. The exhibition had drawn crowds in Paris and London before reaching New York, but the price tag of in excess of \$1million on these *pearls* had deterred even the most enthusiastic European ladies. Maisie immediately asked Morton to buy them for her, but despite considerable pressure he continued to refuse to do so.

Just as Morton was stricken by Maisie, she in turn was stricken by these *pearls* and was determined to have them. Maisie was not going to be thwarted by Morton so approached Cartier with a proposal that she would swap her wedding present, the Fifth Avenue

Mansion, for the *pearls* and the deal was done. This is almost definitely the highest price ever paid for a *pearl* necklace but Maisie was delighted and wore them at almost every social event she graced.

What happened to the Mansion on Fifth Avenue is quite clear, as it remains Cartier's flagship store in New York, but the fate of Maisie's *pearls* is a little less certain. Some say they were lost whilst Maisie was staying at a family owned hotel and her ghost still walks the corridors searching for them, whilst others say they were sold by her heirs for a mere \$150,000 some time in the 1950's. This would have been a shame as in 2004 a necklace thought to be similar was sold by Christies for \$3.1 million, which shows that the finest natural *pearls* still command the highest of prices.

To explain these prices for natural *pearls*, it is estimated that for every 25,000 wild oysters found in the ocean, only one gem-quality *pearl* is uncovered. As a result, today most *pearls*, including the finest South Sea and Tahitian varieties, are cultured. Fine examples of these can command upward of £50,000 per strand because farming the delicate molluscs in pristine waters is an expensive business that often fails to produce *pearls* of high quality.

Now I seem to have been distracted by the story of Maisie and there is so much I could say about *pearls* but as always I simply can't

cram it all into two pages. So if my little rambling so far have started you wondering about those *pearls* that have been passed down through the family but you know nothing about, perhaps it has reminded you about the *pearls* you brought on impulse whilst on holiday or it may be you would just love to buy some *pearls* but need reassurance and advice, then we at AA Thornton are always there to help.

As this month's birthstone is *pearl* and, as part of our continuing AA Thornton centenary celebrations, we are going even further and I have managed to persuade Jackie Saunders, a Gemmologist with a special interest in *pearls* to spend Saturday 13th in the shop to talk to you about *pearls*.

Your questions such as "how do you tell if *pearls* are real?", "are they worth anything?", "what's the difference between simulated, cultured and natural *pearls*?" and "why are do they vary so much in value?" can be all be answered.

Jackie, who is also a highly qualified jewellery valuer, can also discuss with you basic identification, re-stringing or re-modelling, cleaning and care, together with any possible valuation requirements.

So we look forward to seeing you at 1/7 High Street, Kettering, and please remember to bring along your *pearls*.



Maisie Plant

