The Hope Diamond
“Star of the East”

BY CLAIRE PLOEGMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TULA
“Times have changed,” croons Cole Porter, and in slide the violins, their sound bronzed with age, tinny as the brass section. Lines from the song “Anything Goes” chronicled the Rockefellers, the Vanderbilts, the Whitneys, and the McLeans on the 1930s Broadway stage. Yet, the gramophonic sound does not spin from a record but streams from an iPhone in the palm of Nashville’s Joseph McLean Gregory.

“Let me get this right,” Joseph says as he begins to describe his family tree. This is his preface, again and again, because his story syncs so many icons of history that the theory of “six degrees” is rendered lax, unimpressive.

The McLeans mentioned in the toe tapper are Joseph’s great-grandparents, Ned and Evalyn. History knows them both, yet the world rolls out the red carpet to reference her in full: Evalyn Walsh McLean, final and veteran private owner of the Hope Diamond. Joseph, himself, was brought up by his adopted parents, beloved songsters Tom T. and Dixie Hall.

Evalyn Walsh McLean purchased the Hope Diamond in 1911, after Pierre Cartier reset the gem to her liking within new precious metal accoutrements and a tantalizing history. Cartier told Evalyn of previous owners, including in his list a Hindu god and a chain of enterprising Frenchmen. Most of the information would have been familiar to readers of The Moonstone, an 1868 novel by Wilkie Collins. Yet, the idea that the unlucky Marie Antoinette had worn the diamond when it was known as the “French Blue” was too tempting a fiction, and Evalyn traded $180,000 to acquire the centerpiece for her already glittered existence.

Evalyn was known for hosting home soirees, and of her Gatsbyesque residences, she named two “Friendship.” First Lady Florence Harding was her dearest friend through her adulthood. Together, they architected ornate state dinners, many of which they hosted at Evalyn’s house. Over the years, Evalyn mixed and mingled with eight presidential couples. King Albert and Queen Victoria were her parents’ houseguests. Dissimilar figures like J. Edgar Hoover, Will Rogers, Hollywood’s Barrymores, and Arlene Dahl completed her trove of friends.

“Evalyn used the Hope Diamond as a platform for her life,” Joseph explains, alluding to the magnetic influence it added to her inherited wealth.

The owners immediately prior to Evalyn met such unhappy endings that the blue jewel shone with blame. Many believed the Hope Diamond brought a curse, contagious to secondary wearers. To Evalyn, a doomful diamond could hardly bring anything but heightened notoriety. Deaths, debts, and thefts have always been excellent conversation starters.

After all, the heiress had experienced charms and tragedies pre-diamond. Evalyn’s father, Thomas Walsh, moved the family from Colorado to Washington, D.C., when he struck a seemingly endless vein of gold after years of scouring spent mines. But success is not also a protector. A horrific car accident almost robbed the Walsh parents of their family. Evalyn’s excruciating injuries left her bedridden for months, and for the rest of her life she limped in the absence of a shoe support. Her younger brother—her confidant—Vinson, was gored and died at the scene. Unwillingly, Evalyn became the sole heir, and in her pangs, she turned to morphine.

Years later, history recycled. A car struck Evalyn’s son, whom she had named Vinson. The nine-year-old underwent medical assessment but died the next day from internal injuries.

Tragedies piled. Evalyn’s husband, long separated, hung himself to end years of mental illness complicated by alcohol abuse. His fortune, the Washington Post, survived his management only because it was sold at auction. In 1946, Evalyn’s daughter, Evie, overdosed on sleeping pills.
Evalyn Walsh McLean passed away on April 26, 1947. She was wearing the Hope Diamond, a teardrop stone called the Star of the East, and other icings, totaling two million dollars. Her two remaining children were not present. Her granddaughter, Joseph’s mother, was a small child. The Hope Diamond was slated for the chopping block, an inheritance to be literally divvied among the grandchildren.

“I reflect on it, just imagining how sad that can be when you are at your deepest time, and you have no one in your family around you,” says Joseph, three generations forward.

As if to fly in the face of the curse, Evalyn's gripping fear that someone might steal her moneyed children remained an indirect anxiety. When kidnappers stole the Lindbergh baby, Evalyn sped to the rescue the only way she knew: pawning the Hope Diamond to offset ransom efforts grand enough to result in mortgage calls.

Evalyn was capriciously lauded and ridiculed for her aid, but her empathy always equaled her opulence. She was by no means strangled by her wealth, as the picture of her death might suggest.

Joseph maintains: “I don’t believe in the curse. I don’t think Evalyn ever believed in it, herself. She liked to tell people that there was a curse—a good story connected to it. If she believed in it, she would not have worn the diamond as much.”

Even so, Evalyn Walsh McLean might have been reduced to caricature had it not been for Joseph’s sincerity and the encouragement he received from his mother’s governess, Mimi Palmer, his own godmother.

“She took me to libraries in Asheville, North Carolina, where my mother is from, and to D.C., to Martin Luther King Library, to the Library of Congress” recounts Joseph.

Joseph’s godmother also entrusted him with handwritten contact information.

“She told me, ‘The people on the list that I gave you will not always be around. Get what you can from them, because they will give you the
free things that a library can’t give you—like newspaper clippings, pictures when your mother was a little child.”

After thirty years of squaring conversations with family heirlooms and historic documents, Joseph understands Evalyn Walsh McLean as a great-grandmother with a generous legacy. He’ll tell you Aunt Lucy is responsible for Evalyn’s jewelry shrine and how his own mother teethed upon the Hope Diamond and buried it in the sandbox.

Joseph is the keeper of Evalyn’s estate, even a miniature, deeply faceted crystal trunk, which once held the Hope Diamond, though Evalyn Walsh McLean rarely let the gem rest.

“It gave her a boost. It made her feel good,” Joseph explains.

And truly, it seems Evalyn thought the Hope Diamond to be nearly worthless in a safe deposit box where it could not stir a feeling. Joseph explains that bejeweled Evalyn hitched rides on Red Cross trucks, waving to boost morale and handing out sandwiches (and even cigarettes) during difficult days. Evalyn lent her home for a Red Cross supply factory during wartime. She welcomed WWI’s Bonus Army to their headquarters—her home—when the men marched on Washington to claim their deferred compensation. If she couldn’t open her home, she visited the wounded, even handing off her signature bit of wealth to ailing soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Evalyn’s homes, hospitable to all, continue to tell her story. Friendship is now the site of McLean Gardens, housing for military families. The inside walls of Friendship II were re-arranged for high-end condos, though its outer façade is still recognizably Evalyn’s livable showplace. Current residents permitted Joseph to walk the halls on April 26, 2011, sixty-four years to the day after Evalyn’s passing.

“Why is this lady so important?” Joseph poses. “I think because she brings people together in the long run. She sees a fitting, for either the present or for the future, and with so much to be said about her legacy, people today want to be part of it and connected to it.”

The Hope Diamond has now distinguished Washington, D.C., for 100 years. Evalyn paraded the piece for over three and a half decades, and when she passed, Harry Winston bought her gleaming estate. In 1958, he donated the Hope Diamond to the Smithsonian Institute.

“It was given to the people, by the people,” Joseph explains. “Harry Winston noticed that we didn’t have anything like what Europe had or has. Kings and queens have royalty splash over in museums—their jewelry, crowns, scepters.”

More recently, over 100,000 people voted to select the Hope Diamond’s surrogate setting while its classic is restored and returned in November of 2011. The Smithsonian continues to kindle the fun of the jewel’s debunked infamy by suggesting shapes of unverifiable parent stones that could corroborate a cursed history.

Though Joseph hopes to teach others about Evalyn’s kindness, he by no means resents the basic bylines that history has bestowed. In 1999, Joseph paid tribute to the public and private, accurate and inaccurate stories tethered to Evalyn when he named his high-end fragrance line “Fable,” a blue diamond atop every cap. A year later, Joseph republished his great-grandmother’s autobiography, Father Struck It Rich. The reprint is plentifully amended with photographs and re-titled Queen of Diamonds.

Such public expressions make Joseph easy to find. Recently, Joseph received an email from a thankful teacher who used the Hope Diamond app to prepare her students for a fieldtrip to Washington, D.C. Older souls tell Joseph they remember hearing Evalyn’s public service announcements on the radio. Servicemen now in their eighties have contacted Joseph to share memories of his great-grandmother Evalyn, whom they met during their hospitalization.

“She did a lot in a four decade time. I cannot imagine accomplishing that much,” Joseph says. An industrious great-grandson with a warm personality, Joseph has, in his words, “hit every avenue” to help others find Evalyn Walsh McLean.

Joseph is currently collaborating with the Tennessee State Museum to prepare “American Royalty,” a traveling exhibition of Evalyn Walsh McLean’s estate. Paintings worthy of the White House are among the must-see items reserved half a century ago by Joseph’s maternal grandfather, North Carolina Senator Robert R. Reynolds. Joseph explains that Reynolds was an executor of Evalyn’s will and also a relation of Tennessee’s Sevier family, for whom Nashville’s 12th Avenue park is named. Another eclectic connection: Evalyn’s in-laws bestowed the only memorial for an equine at Belle Meade Plantation. The marker further distinguishes Enquirer, one of the Plantation’s most storied sires, who shared his name with the Cincinnati Enquirer, another McLean-owned publication. The funeral for the horse included a procession by train from Cincinnati to Nashville, a lavish remembrance on par with a birthday party Evalyn hosted for her dog, Mike, who wore the Hope Diamond instead of his collar.

As Joseph McLean Gregory continues to organize his latest efforts to share his great-grandmother with a wide audience, his esteem for personal interaction and the most direct and true story rises to the top: “I think the closest thing I will be able to see and share with people are her homemade movies. Evalyn was ahead of her time.”
(Nashville, TN) It’s the world’s most famous diamond and rarest of gems. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Hope Diamond’s historic purchase by its longest and last private owner, author/stylist/consultant Joseph Gregory has released a new gift book that sheds brilliant light on its myth, mystery, and magnificence. The Hope Diamond: Evalyn Walsh McLean and the Captivating Mystery of the World’s Most Alluring Jewel (Providence House Publishers) explores the remarkable journey of the enchanting blue diamond and the rich legacy of Gregory’s great-grandmother, Evalyn, who purchased it in 1911.

Although much has been written and speculated about the storied gem, Gregory offers an in-depth look behind the intrigue, fascination, and misfortune of those who dared to possess it. The 45.52 carat diamond is now valued at $250 million and is the most popular object at the Smithsonian Institute. Its unparalleled qualities inspired Gregory to share its history with others.

“I wanted to do this book because it’s about people, the people who owned the Hope Diamond. It personalizes the story. So much has been written about the history of this blue gem. However, this is a much more pictorial account,” says Gregory. “Now the reader can connect the images with the previous owners in a way that has never been done before,” he explains.

A highly sought-after designer and motivational speaker, Joseph is the creator/founder of Fable, the exquisite fragrance line that was inspired by the Hope Diamond. He’s also known for helping to keep countless celebrities red carpet ready from singers Pam Tillis, Dolly Parton, and Donna Summer to Hollywood actress Raquel Welch and legendary columnist Liz Smith. A noted author and historian, he received rave reviews for his previous book, Queen of Diamonds.

To order the book, download the free Hope Diamond app or get more details, please visit: www.evalynwalshmclean.com. You can also order copies of the book at: www.amazon.com and www.providencehouse.com, or by calling toll-free at: (800) 321-5692.