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DEATH OF A PRINCESS

The Mystery of Mercy Argenteau

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There once was a Princess who lived in seclusion in Belmont Heights, Tampa, and who died a mysterious death. For over fifty years, Tampanians have searched in vain for clues to uncover the facts of her fate.

Her name was Princesse de Montglyn Rosalie Francoise Adelaide Caroline Eugenie Marie Argenteau, Countess de Mercy Argenteau. She was the last member of one of the oldest Royal lines of Belgium.

Although she lived in relative obscurity on a limited income after she came to Tampa in the early 1920's, it was not long before people throughout the city were talking about an alleged fortune in jewelry, paintings, and artifacts that she kept in her modest house on the southwest corner of 30th Street and Hargrove Avenue.

It was not just her exotic past and personal wealth which made her a favorite conversation topic in Tampa. She had a strange relationship with her landlord, her half-brother John H. Werne, alias John H. Casey. Her story was documented not only by her interviews with neighbors, but in a blunt autobiography called *Last Of A Race*, and in a stormy battle in the probate court of Hillsborough County six years after her death.

Princess Argenteau was born in Argenteau Castle, on July 18, 1862, the only child of Eugene d'Argenteau and Princess Louise de Caraman Climay. Her parents wanted a male heir and never let her forget their

disappointment by leaving her with strict governesses and tutors. At twenty, she was pressured into marrying Herbert Marquis d'Avaray in a massive wedding attended by the King of Belgium, Archduke Ferdinand of Austria, and the Duke of Edinburgh. She was deluged with priceless gifts which one day would grace a West Coast Florida museum. Although they had a son Antoine Rousseau, Herbert and Mercy shared little in common and she soon spent months traveling with friends to avoid her husband.

On a trip to Bangkok, she became addicted to opium, but claimed in her autobiography to cure herself by using her father's smelling salts as a substitute stimulant. The fear of losing her beloved Antoine in an impending divorce settlement probably curtailed her abuse with drugs. She shifted her resentment of her life of aimless privilege from traveling to raising championship show dogs.

Another strange event changed her life. Her father confessed to her on his death bed that she had a half-brother living in the United States. She promised to locate him and reunite the Argenteau family. She moved to America to search for her lost relation while her grown son Antoine remained in Europe as an automobile racer.

In 1910, one of her lawyers summoned her to Havana, Cuba, to meet a drifter who fit the description of the missing half-brother.



The favorite photograph of Mercy Argenteau, the "Princess of Belmont Heights".

"He was full of hard living with Irish blue eyes and a brusque manner," she noted in her book, "but we found much in common and I felt that I was making headway with him. His mother had drowned in North Carolina and he was reluctant to make confidences in return."

She convinced this John H. Casey to join her in New York and help her breed championship dogs. He became her partner, but in a few years her happiness was forever destroyed by two tragic events. The Germans in World War One destroyed Argenteau Castle and most of her investments, while soon after the war, Antoine was killed in a European Grand Prix. The Princess returned to her traveling ways, first

moving with Casey to Southern California, then to Polk County, Florida, and finally to Tampa.

Casey rented a house and took a job at the Oscar Daniels Shipyard at the Tampa Estuary, while the Princess retired to her past. Her Belmont Heights neighbors watched her take daily walks in an out-dated dress and a floppy hat. She enjoyed old casual clothes, but insisted on wearing expensive jewelry and a French perfume that cost eight dollars an ounce.

Rumors of her wealth circulated around Tampa, still a small city despite the Florida Land Boom. French consul E. W. Monrose told his friends that he had to get the Princess a special permit to bring some of her treasures past United States customs. When some neighbors heard she was having financial troubles living off her monthly income from Europe, she was offered money for her jewelry.

The Princess told Mrs. Amos L. Harris that "she would rather starve than part with any of her treasures."

There was indeed treasures at the Argenteau residence, as noted by neighbor Mrs. Raymond L. Young who told Tampa Times owner and local historian D. Brenham McKay that the house was "a museum of artifacts, particularly the diningroom with its massive oval table, lifesize portrait of the Princess, and furnishings with blue Argenteau monogram and crest.

"I was given a showing of some of her jewelry," Mrs. Young recalled. "She kept them in an old bag hanging on a closet door knob with an old coat hanging over it. She had many earrings, but I particularly remember one pair. The emerald bases were a half-inch square with a diamond in each



This bust of Mercy Argenteau graced the foyer of her Belmont Heights residence and later the lobby of the Argenteau Castle in St. Petersburg.

corner as large as a match head. She had many strings of pearls, some two or three strings together. One string was about four feet long - she put this about her neck four of five times."

Every room of the house was filled with antiques and gifts. There were screens of inlaid ivory given by an Arab sheik, a gown with silver trim from the King of Spain, and expensive furniture. The walls were lined with every one of the ninety-five dogs she raised as winners.

Neighbors soon discovered that the Princess was living in fear of her half-brother. She confessed to Emma N. Gaylord, who spent five months typing the Argenteau autobiography, that she was "never fully

satisfied that he (Casey) was the son of her father. She didn't trust him. She was robbed several times and suspected Casey when he tried to place the guilt on neighborhood boys."

Miss Julien Soule, another neighbor, told D. B. McKay that the Princess not only feared Casey was a fraud, but also believed he had given or sold many of her jewels to Mrs. Madeline Gill, a family friend. Despite her suspicions, she never approached her lawyer James J. Lansford to investigate Casey's identity or any other matter.

In April of 1925, the Doran Publishing Company of New York City published *The Last Of A Race*, and the New York Times Sunday edition printed episodes from the autobiography. In accordance with Casey's wishes, she did not mention him, her Tampa life, or her present feelings. Still, the blunt manner in which she exposed the foibles and emptiness of European high society and the intimacy in which she confessed her adventurous past helped the book gain respectable reviews. Since the publishing house closed its doors, it is not known whether the Princess received substantial payments for the book.

On Saturday evening, July 25, 1925, the Princess had a violent headache and Casey summoned Mrs. Gill to come over. They gave her a cup of tea and put her to bed at ten o'clock. The next morning, when Casey came downstairs from his bedroom, he found his half-sister lying at her bathroom door. She was dead before the physician arrived.

The death of Princess Mercy Argenteau was buried in the obituary page on a day when William Jennings Bryan also died, but her story would soon reopen when Casey and Mrs. Gill emptied the Tampa residence of all

its valuables. Six months later the name "Princesse de Montgylon Argenteau, Countesse de Mercy Argenteau" appeared on a door plate on a large isolated mansion at Pinellas Point in St. Petersburg. For \$1.50 a tourist could enter "Argenteau Castle", a split-level nouveau museum, at 72000 Serpentine Circle.

Who was the proprietor and owner of this unusual museum? None other than Mrs. Drury J. Gill, wife of the Vice-President of the West Coast Grocery of Tampa. The exhibits featured the jewelry, clothing, paintings, furniture, silverware, china, and momentos of the Princess. Upstairs were even stranger attractions. The hallway featured a diamond studded dog collar, photographs of her animals, and an open, velvet-lined casket in which lay a stuffed dog, given to her by the Tsar of Russia. One bedroom presented the letters and momentos the Princess had kept of her beloved son Antoine. There was even a photograph of the racing car which took his life.

The Argenteau Museum was a financial failure, for the Florida Land Bust and the building's poor location limited the number of tourists. In three years, the museum closed. In 1933 Albert F. Lang, popular St. Petersburg Mayor, purchased Argenteau Castle and converted it into one of the showplace residences on the Florida West Coast.

The closing of the museum only intensified the concern of Tampa's Dutch consul Jean R. Van Blinck, who had long believed that the priceless heirlooms of the Argenteau estate should be returned or sold to the National Museum of Belgium. When the Princess died without a will, leaving Casey as owner of the collection, Van Blinck had tried to negotiate a transaction between Casey and some interested Belgian officials.

The consul was worried about the influence the Gills had on Casey, who was in poor health with cirrhosis of the liver.

By December of 1927, Casey was under the almost daily care of Dr. Linwood Gable of St. Petersburg. On a visit to Miami three months later, Casey suddenly died. Van Blinck insisted in having Casey's body exhumed and the autopsy indicated that a probable cause of death was poisoning by laudanum, a preparation of opium. A fatal dosage of 300 to 400 mg to a habituated drug user, however, would yield symptoms of a feeling of warmth and intoxication and be undetected by a victim.

The Dutch consul tried to convince police officials that Casey's overdose might not have been self-induced. He described the death of the Princess, but officials rejected his contentions by showing that Casey had a history of drug abuse. This left Van Blinck with just one recourse: to gain administration of the Argenteau estate now in the -hands of the Gills.

Van Blinck instituted a four year court battle by applying first in Pinellas and later in Hillsborough for the status as administrator of Eugenie de Mercy Argenteau's estate. In a confidential report, he explained his suspicions about the deaths of Princess Argenteau and John Casey and argued that the estate should be reopened to evaluate its jewelry and artifacts.

Tampa lawyer Alonzo B. McMullen, a friend of the Gills, opposed Van Blinck's petition and gave Hillsborough County Judge G. H. Cornelius twelve reasons why the petition of administration should be denied. His strongest grounds included the fact the estate had no surviving heirs or known legal descendants, nor were there any creditors to the estate, nor was Van Blinck

entitled to any preference as administrator. There was no real estate involved in the Casey name.

McMullen concluded that "(Van Blinck's) allegations are so vague, so uncertain and indefinite, and the same is so poorly and loosely drawn that this Honorable Court would not be justified in making an appointment of an administrator. "

At a hearing on July 27, 1931, at Hillsborough County Courthouse, Judge Cornelius rejected without comment the Van Blinck petition. Thus ending, if not unsatisfactorily, the conflict over the Argenteau estate. When the Gills left Tampa, the treasures of the Argenteau left with them. But the Princess of Belmont Heights remains in Tampa, in a secluded and small grave at Myrtle Hill Cemetery.