

# ANASTASIA

by

Charles C. Parlin, Sr.

In Germany, the Berlin police fished out of a canal a girl who had jumped from a bridge in a suicide attempt. She refused to state her name or where she came from and they put her in a mental institution. Here, with only a number and an arbitrarily assigned name, she fitted into the life, performing the menial tasks assigned. In time the matron took an interest because the girl was unusual. She spoke English, French, German; her table manners bespoke a cultured background. One day, in a burst of confidence, the girl confided to the matron that she was Anastasia, daughter of the murdered Tsar. This did not startle the matron as she already had in her care two wives of Napoleon and a number of other famous characters of history, but, because the identity of the girl bothered her, she started to read up on the family Romanov. Thus, she discovered that the wife of the Tsar and the queen of Greece were sisters and that in the spring of 1914, before the outbreak of World War I, the Russian royal family had visited the Greek royal family and that during a period of some weeks the two cousins, Anastasia, The Russian princess, and Xenia, the Greek princess, had played much on the beaches together and that now Xenia was married to a wealthy American by the name of Leeds. So the matron wrote to Mrs. Leeds, saying she had a girl who thought she was a cousin, Anastasia, and suggesting next time Mrs. Leeds was in Europe she come to the institution.

Sometime later, Mrs. Leeds motoring in Germany with a jolly group, remembered the letter and the group decided it would be a lark to go to the institution and see this girl who thought she was the youngest daughter of the Tsar. On arrival, they introduced themselves to the matron and the matron sent out for the girl. As she was brought into the room the girl stared at the group, then turning to Mrs. Leeds said, "Xenia—why are you here!" And Mrs. Leeds said, "May the Heavens be my judge, this is my cousin Anastasia!" Mrs. Leeds cabled to my law firm and we secured for the girl entrance papers and got her to New York where she was entertained and befriended by Mrs. Leeds and a wealthy spinster by the name of Miss Jennings. These two

wealthy women undertook to pay all the expenses and directed that we proceed to establish this girl's rights to the Romanov fortune and the throne of Russia. At one time the Romanov family had been one of the wealthiest families in the world with bank deposits and investments in many countries, including very substantial holdings in the United States.

Then the fun started. Often when we would question the girl she would cry pitifully, deny she was Anastasia, say she knew we were the Gestapo and were going to shoot her. She was only a sick, defenseless girl. Why did we trick her, ask her to lie and then shoot her; why not just shoot her. Or better, why not let her go back to the German institution where she had no name and nobody asked her questions and where she had felt security and safety. At other times she was Queen of the Russias. Who were we, mere lawyers, to be bothering her—and she would order us out of the house.

Out of these troubled sessions we patiently pieced out the story. The Russian Royal Family was under arrest by the Bolsheviks in the castle at Ekaterinburg and then came the day when the Tsar, his wife and four children were herded into a single room and cut down by pistol shot and saber. This girl in New York had a long wound on the right side of the face extending from chin to temple. It could have been a saber cut. The next she remembered was awakening. She was on the floor in a pool of blood. She tried to look about but there were the bodies of her family and she swooned again. From time to time she awoke but not daring to look about merely stared at the wall in front of her. The next she knew she was in the loft of a cottage of a peasant family—a father and mother and a son. They told her that the soldiers had put the bodies of the family in a woodbin to be disposed of under cover of night but that they, the peasants, had peeked in, seen a spark of life in the youngest girl and secretly removed her. The drunken soldiers later removing the bodies at night had not missed the one. When the girl had been nursed back to health the peasants began to realize the enormity of their crime, but they had also become attached to the girl whom they had saved. They had a German background and decided they would try to get back to Germany. So they started a long trek which was to take them two years—working for lodging and food and always pushing on—father and mother and the young fellow and

the girl. En route she had lived with the young fellow and had given birth to a stillborn baby. (The doctors who examined the girl in New York told us that the girl had given birth to a child). The test for the family was to come when they tried to cross the border into Germany. As they approached the border it was agreed that they would pose as Germans seeking to regain their homeland. Each night and each morning they told themselves that they were Germans and that they neither spoke nor understood Russian. They succeeded in crossing the border and got to Berlin in a typhoid epidemic which took the mother and father. The boy disappeared and abandoned the dazed, mentally incompetent girl who had wandered the streets of Berlin for three days and nights without food and in the desperation of hunger had attempted the solution of jumping off the bridge.

The story made sense but there were some problems. We knew that the real Anastasia spoke four languages—Russian, French, English and this girl spoke only German, French and English—no Russian. This was really perplexing. But the head of the psychology department at Columbia studying the case said this reconciled with the story. Months of constant reminder that knowledge of Russian would mean death, working on an already weak and unbalanced mind, could have the effect of hypnotizing out of a language—out of the ability to understand or to speak a word. He was prepared to so testify before a jury.

I mentioned that at the time of the murder of the family the girl recalled awakening and staring at the wall because she did not dare to roll over and view the bodies. One day she said that wallpaper had photographed itself onto her mind and with a pencil she drew for us the design of the paper. It was an intricate one. Later we were able to get an investigator into that room of the Ekaterinburg Castle and he brought back a photograph. The girl *had drawn that wallpaper!*

Whoever she was, this girl in New York was a physical and mental wreck. There was no visual similarity to the rosy, happy 14 year old child that the world knew pre-War I as the Tsar's youngest daughter. But there were many who believed. Sergei Rachmaninoff, the great concert pianist and composer, had been a favorite at the Tsar's court and had been often with the family at the palace. He went to his grave believing this was Anastasia. He told us of a Russian violinist who was

in New York but who had once been a great favorite of the Tsar and had known the family well. We located the fellow fiddling for a living in a night club. When we brought him to see the girl he looked her up and down, stared into her face and declared this could not be the Anastasia he had known at the Russian palace because there was absolutely no similarity. Slowly emerging from what appeared to be a stupor, the girl said to him: "You don't remember me? You don't remember the time when you played at the palace and when you had finished your concert you asked if anyone had a request and I, then a child, requested a simple nursery tune which you didn't know and how my father laughed at you for your embarrassment in not knowing this simple nursery tune?" The man was obviously startled. He said: "That incident I had entirely forgotten, but it is true. The Tsar did laugh at me, and I remember it because afterward I spent months on a composition based on that nursery tune and the next time I was invited to the palace I played my composition and the Tsar remembered the incident and roundly commended my work."

But all was not easy. One day Miss Jennings telephoned in high distress. Anastasia had locked herself in a bathroom on the fourth floor and was threatening to jump. My partner quickly called the police and then we hopped in a cab and went tearing to the place, arriving as the police were preparing to spread a net outside the window. The butler in a high state of anguish admitted us and we raced up the stairs. It was a wooden door we faced, and taking an andiron from the adjacent room my colleague bashed in a panel, reached inside and opened the door. There she stood—the Queen of the Russias—and said to us "Pardon me gentlemen, but had you knocked, I would have opened the door."

It was clear that the girl was insane. If we presented the case to the jury there was no telling what she would say. We had decided to go to the jury with such facts as we had, tell the jury the girl was insane, that we would put her on the stand and ask her questions but no matter what she said, to disregard it. From the other facts which we would piece together they would have to judge. We had three photographs—the first of Anastasia, the round-faced happy girl of 14 taken that summer when the family was visiting in Greece; the second the police photo taken front and profile against a white background of the insane, starved creature with bulging eyes, they had hauled out of the

canal, her hair still wet and matted on her head; and the third a studio photograph of the girl in New York after the dressmakers and the facial massagers and photographer, the hairdressers, had done their magic. A sable scarf was slung casually across her shoulder—so that it just cut off the saber scar. In the picture, this girl in her twenties was attractive. Between those three pictures there was *no* similarity. We planned to show those three photos to the jury and explain “We know that pictures 2 and 3 are the same girl. Does it tax your credulity more to believe that 1 and 2 are the same girl?”

More and more she cried and begged to go back to the institution in Germany and this the doctors finally recommended. They said that even if we won for her the Romanov fortune it would never bring peace to her troubled mind. We could build a barricaded fortress, patrolled night and day by armed guards—but this was exactly what she did not want. Then we had to pay the German Government an exorbitant fee to take her back into the institution but at last all was arranged. I saw her off on a ship, accompanied by two buxom Irish nurses with psychiatric experience.

Miriam had done much research for me on the family Romanov and had become intensely interested in the case. She wanted to at least see the girl. I had been warned by the doctors that there might be trouble at the pier; that in spite of her repeated requests to be sent back to Germany when she saw the boat she might change her mind; scream that she was being kidnapped under my direction; and that there was a risk I might be arrested before things could be straightened out. I did not want Miriam involved in this so we drove in, parked our car several blocks from the pier and then went separately to the pier. We had arrived about an hour before the arrival of the girl and her nurses and during this time Miriam and I walked up and down the pier without showing any sign of recognition. When the trio arrived I greeted them, chatted with them on the dock for a time giving Miriam a chance to circle around and have a good look, and then went up the gangplank and to the cabins.

In the suite of rooms on the ship which we had reserved there was an enormous bouquet of flowers with a card which read: “To my princess from her ever faithful subject—Sergei Rachmaninoff.” She was

again the Queen of the Russias and ordered me off the boat. I joined Miriam and after the boat sailed we drove back to Englewood. I never heard from the girl again. A few years later Hitler moved in and sent the inmates of mental institutions to the gas chambers.

Was she or was she not Anastasia? Miriam, who had done a lot of research for me, always thought she was. No one will ever know for certain. A dictator snuffed out the possibility of knowing the truth.

After the World War II, German lawyers showed up with a woman living in the Black Forest whom they claimed was Anastasia—the girl we had had in New York. Selling photos and texts for magazine articles produced quite a bit of publicity—and cash. Three times, when I was in Germany, I was approached by representatives of this group who wanted the materials and proofs which we had developed. But they never had a satisfactory explanation of how their client had escaped Hitler's gas chambers. If I would join them and produce my proofs I could share with them the big Romanov fortune. I suggested that I would go with them to the Black Forest, but their refusal to allow me to see their client confirmed my suspicions that she was a fake. The German highest court after long litigation rejected this woman's claim.

"Anastasia" has been put into a Broadway play and at least two movies, one produced in this country and one in Germany. All these productions make the lawyers the villains, picturing them as having taken a mentally weak girl, coaching her and trying to build up a case so that through her they can get hands on the Tsar's fortune. Both scenes are laid in Berlin, involving Berlin lawyers rather than in New York with New York lawyers. Perhaps they were afraid of libel suits if they used New York. The suspense is produced by the girl from time to time startling the lawyers by showing bits of remembrance, causing them to wonder if perhaps the girl really is Anastasia. For example, they despair in their attempts to overcome the Russian language defect by teaching her Russian, but then one day she falls unconscious and in her swooning talks fluent Russian. In the three productions she runs away and disappears before the lawyers can complete their work on the case.

Nobody ever qualified in court to claim the Tzar's fortune. During World War I the Imperial Russian Government borrowed widely and in

this country, for example, J. P. Morgan & Co. sold an issue of Imperial Russian Government notes. Almost every bank in the U.S.A. had some because taking these notes was heralded as a patriotic support to the Allies' war effort. After the Tzar's death and the collapse of Imperial Russia, the banks took the position that the Tzar and the Government were one and therefore applied the Romanov assets against the unpaid Imperial Government notes. This proposition is not supportable in the law here nor, I believe, in England, Sweden, Finland, etc., where the banks did the same; but nobody has ever qualified as the Tzar's rightful heir and thus been able to challenge this action of the banks in court.