

## Tragic Drama Under the Miami Moon

Written by Antolín García Carbonell  
February 2009

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### In 1938 a future king met his fate on the Boulevard



Mildred Gaydon left Frank White's Casino, a fashionable after-hours club at 10990 Biscayne Blvd., and began driving south on the Boulevard to take her gentleman friend, Don Alfonso de Borbón, back to the Miami Colonial Hotel, where he had been living for the past year. The time was around 3:00 a.m. The date was Tuesday, September 6, 1938.

Mildred, known as "Merry Millie," was the popular, 25-year-old cigarette girl at Don Dickerson's Pirate's Den, a raucous nightclub located on a branch of the Miami River. She had spent that Labor Day evening with Don Alfonso in their usual routine -- after dinner and a movie, they had visited a couple of nightspots before returning home.

Driving south on the dark Boulevard, a two-lane stretch of asphalt running through an undeveloped portion of northeast Miami, they had just passed the Little Farm sheds at 84th Street (which now houses a coin laundry) when a northbound truck's lights blinded Millie. Startled, she veered right to avoid a collision, but faulty steering on her car caused the wheels to lock. She then overcompensated, veering left to keep from going off the pavement, and crashed into a utility pole on the east side of the Boulevard at 82nd Street.

The front end of Millie's 1930 Model A Ford was smashed, and both of the vehicle's occupants were a little banged up, though their injuries didn't appear to be life-threatening. Don Alfonso was conscious, but had suffered a skull fracture and traumatic shock, conditions most healthy 31-year-old men could survive. As someone afflicted with hemophilia, however, he was not completely healthy. In fact within hours he would be pronounced dead at Victoria Hospital. Despite Don Alfonso's death-bed plea that his dear friend not be blamed for the accident, Millie would be charged with manslaughter.

The accident happened too late to make that morning's *Miami Herald*, but the afternoon *Miami Daily News*

played the story big, on the front page, with this headline: "Count Dies From Accident Injuries. Spanish Nobleman Is Fatally Injured As Car Hits Pole. Hereditary Disease Thought Responsible For Death After Bruises In Boulevard Crash; Girl To Be Questioned." Don Alfonso, though, was not your run-of-the-mill European aristocrat. By birthright, he was to inherit the Spanish throne and would one day become that country's king. For the next four days, the world's press descended upon Miami to report details of the fatal accident.

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Proclaimed Prince of Asturias at his birth in Madrid's royal palace on May 10, 1907, Don Alfonso was the first-born son of King Alfonso XIII (1886-1941) and Victoria Eugenia de Battenberg (1887-1969), granddaughter of Queen Victoria of England. Like her better-known cousin, Alix of Hesse, later Tsarista Alexandra of Russia, both were carriers of the hemophilia gene, a legacy they inherited from Queen Victoria and passed on to their sons.

Alexandra and her husband, Tsar Nicholas II, attempted to control their son's hemophilia through the mystical powers of a charismatic monk known as Rasputin, whose abuse of royal patronage became a factor in the downfall of the house of Romanov and the rise of communist rule in Russia. Don Alfonso's parents learned from the errors of their Russian cousins and did a better job of managing the condition that eventually afflicted two of their sons. But then as now, there was no cure for hemophilia and the uncontrollable bleeding that could result from even routine bruises.

King Alfonso XIII ruled until 1931, when the social unrest that would lead to the Spanish Civil War prompted the royal family to flee into exile. The crown prince, while a patient at a Swiss sanitarium in 1933, fell in love with a Cuban beauty named Doña Edelmira Sampedro y Robato, whose wealthy father owned a sugar mill in the present-day province of Cienfuegos. But Doña Edelmira was a commoner, and Spanish law forbade the heir to the crown from marrying a commoner. So Don Alfonso, following his heart and pressured by his father, abdicated his right to the throne. He and his true love, both 27 years old, were married in Switzerland and took the title Count and Countess of Covadonga. Don Alfonso's younger brother, Don Juan, was named the new Prince of Asturias.

Don Alfonso's marriage to Doña Edelmira began falling apart after just a year, following the death in an automobile accident of his youngest brother, Don Gonzalo, who also suffered from hemophilia. (The accident bore many eerie similarities to his own car crash four years later.)

According to the unpublished memoirs of the Countess of Covadonga, Don Alfonso became irrational after he instructed his Swiss bodyguard/nurse, Gottfried Schweizer, to administer morphine dosages to numb the psychic pain of his brother's loss, even though he was not in physical pain. Unable to change this behavior, a terrified Doña Edelmira fled to Cuba, but after exchanging many letters and a case of Scotch, the couple reconciled. Don Alfonso arrived in New York in May 1935, and Doña Edelmira joined him there. The press reported that the two had decided to move to Hollywood to work in motion pictures.

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But after several months in New York, they moved instead to Havana, with Gottfried Schweizer in tow, where Don Alfonso nearly died after an attempt to lance a cyst on his leg provoked severe bleeding. During this crisis, Doña Edelmira confirmed her previous suspicions that Schweizer, who disliked life in Cuba, exerted his own Rasputin-like influence over her husband. When Don Alfonso and Schweizer sailed for New York en route to Paris, Doña Edelmira stayed behind in Havana.

On landing in New York, his leg still in a cast, Don Alfonso announced that he had taken an advisory position with British Motors Ltd. Shortly afterward he was photographed in nightclubs accompanied by the stunning fashion model Marta Rocafort y Altuzarra, daughter of a Havana dentist. Faced with this outrage, Doña Edelmira filed for divorce in Havana, setting off a huge scandal.

During the summer of 1936, as Spain descended into war, Don Alfonso was frequently in the New York papers after British Motors encountered financial difficulties and he borrowed money against the crown jewels to help bail out the company's president. Matters were made worse when a summons for his arrest was issued for failure to appear in court regarding a traffic violation. Meanwhile his bother Juan, the new crown prince, and his father were making news of a different sort. They were actively trying to assist Generalissimo Francisco Franco's side in the Spanish Civil War.

In August 1936, Don Alfonso was once again hospitalized with uncontrolled bleeding. This time his mother and sister rushed to his bedside as the press kept a tally of the number of blood transfusions he received. With his mother's assistance, all the sordid matters in New York were settled and Don Alfonso returned to Cuba by the end of that year. It was probably during a stopover in Miami on his way to Havana that he met Mildred "Millie" Gaydon.

By May 1937, Don Alfonso and Doña Edelmira were divorced. Two months later he married Marta Rocafort in a lavish civil ceremony with a guest list headed by Cuban President Federico Laredo Bru. This second marriage, however, began to disintegrate after just two weeks, and ended in another contentious Cuban divorce several months later.

In the fall of 1937, Don Alfonso and his new bodyguard, Jack Fleming, left Cuba and set up camp at the Miami Colonial Hotel at 146 Biscayne Blvd., which today is known as the Riande Continental Miami Bayside Hotel. Shortly after arriving, he visited the Pirate's Den, described in a contemporary review as a "private-styled night club where patrons are encouraged to break

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bottles and release inhibitions,” and where the staff dressed in period costumes as part of the entertainment. (The site, at 2300 NW 14th St., is now home to the Miami Police Benevolent Association’s banquet and park facility.) Don Alfonso became a regular, and would ask the band to play his favorite song, “There’s a Tavern in the Town.” He also renewed his acquaintance with “Merry Millie” and her sister Mary, who together ran the tobacco and hat-check concessions.

Don Alfonso, his allowance reduced by legal and medical bills, as well as alimony payments to Doña Edelmira and the impact of the Spanish Civil War on the family’s finances, was forced to maintain a low profile in Miami, quietly going out for a night on the town with the Gaydon sisters and later just with Millie. In April 1938, he traveled to New York to appear on the radio program *Ripley’s Believe It or Not*, but that kind of publicity was, for him, now a thing of the past.

The worsening political situation made a return to Europe difficult, and Don Alfonso discussed with Millie the possibility of taking off for the South Seas. There was talk of a romance, and Don Alfonso did give Millie a charm bracelet on the night before the car accident, but by all accounts theirs was a platonic relationship.

Don Alfonso and Jack Fleming apparently visited Madam Sherry’s, then Miami’s second-best brothel, located just off Biscayne Boulevard at NE 54th Street. (See “Madam Sherry’s Moorish Castle,” *BT*, May 2008.) Madam Sherry told Robert Tralins, coauthor of her memoir, *Pleasure Was My Business*, that Don Alfonso had a preference for heavy women and that she hired a prostitute named Jewell to address his desires. Jewell reportedly was much taken with Don Alfonso and became distraught when she learned about Millie Gaydon’s relationship with him.

Jewell in turn blamed Millie for Don Alfonso’s death and claimed that Millie was part of a conspiracy to murder him, since Generalissimo Franco, then leading his troops to victory in the bloody Spanish Civil War, was going to reinstate him as monarch. (A restoration of the Spanish monarchy was indeed under discussion in 1938, but Don Alfonso’s chances of regaining the throne, even if he had remained married to Doña Edelmira, were minimal. His poor health and the fact that his marriage to Doña Edelmira had produced no children were major strikes against him.)

“Jewell” was probably Madam Sherry herself, a pleasingly plump, middle-age seductress, who

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may or may not have satisfied Don Alfonso's physical needs and ended up becoming infatuated with him. But Doña Edelmira, Marta Rocafort, and Millie Gaydon, the three women identified as love interests in Don Alfonso's life, were all svelte, strikingly beautiful women. So why would he be so taken with a 170-pound madam?

Speculation about Don Alfonso's female preferences aside, there was no question he was with Millie as they left Frank White's Casino in the early-morning hours of September 6, 1938. After crashing into the utility pole where today's Bistro 82 is located, Don Alfonso and Millie were rushed by ambulance to Jackson Memorial Hospital's emergency room. Millie was treated for bruises and released.

According to the *Miami Daily News*, the emergency room physician administered a small amount of morphine to stabilize his condition and quoted Don Alfonso as saying he had taken four or five grains of morphine (about one-third of a gram) daily for the past year because of his hemophilia. The doctor wanted to have him admitted to the hospital so his condition could be monitored, but Don Alfonso insisted on being released in order to be treated by his personal physician.

Over the doctor's objections, bodyguard Jack Fleming took Don Alfonso back to his room at the Colonial Hotel, where he was examined by his personal physician, who found his condition so serious that he had him immediately admitted to Victoria Hospital at 955 NW 3rd St. He died there at noon, calling for his mother and insisting to Fleming that he had distracted Millie Gaydon as the truck was approaching and that he was the one responsible for causing the accident. The possibility that his death would create problems for Millie was a cause of immense distress during his last moments. Ironically, the cause of death, as recorded by Don Alfonso's doctor, was not uncontrolled bleeding but rather "skull fracture and resulting traumatic shock."

That same afternoon Judge Thomas Ferguson issued a warrant charging Millie with manslaughter, pending a coroner's inquest scheduled for the end of that week. The wife of Don Dickerson, Millie's employer, came to the city jail to post bond for her, but Justice Ferguson released her on a promise not to leave the court's jurisdiction.

Don Alfonso's mother, in London at the time, contacted the U.S. Ambassador, Joseph Kennedy, and through him asked Daniel J. Mahoney, editor of the *Miami Daily News* and a personal friend of Don Alfonso, to handle the funeral arrangements with the W.H. Combs Funeral Home.

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Don Alfonso was laid to rest dressed in a white sharkskin suit. Father F.D. Sullivan from downtown Miami's Gesu Catholic Church recited prayers over the coffin at the funeral home before the cortege wound its way down Biscayne Boulevard and past the Colonial Hotel on its way to Graceland Memorial Park, on SW 8th Street in Coral Gables. There he was entombed in a crypt that, according to the cemetery's archives, Mahoney had purchased for \$400 on behalf of the estate.

On the day of the funeral, the *Miami Herald* published an editorial that summed up Don Alfonso's days in Miami: "Once more, dramatic news and history are written in Miami, and this time it is history that concerns the world, a history that involves nations and monarchs. For here was climaxed and concluded the career of a man born to be king..., [that] ended violently and yet prosaically, like that of many a commoner, in an automobile crashed against a utility pole. Tragic melodrama of the middle years of history; drama under the Miami moon, under the tropic sun."

Although Marta Rocafort, who had married a Miami Beach police officer, was living in Miami, she did not attend the funeral. Doña Edelmira was too disturbed to attend but was represented by her brother-in-law. She subsequently paid to have the marble marker on the crypt inscribed. Daniel Mahoney, Jack Fleming, the Gaydon sisters, Millie's attorney Otto Stegeman, and W.D. Bartlett, a former slot machine operator and close friend of Don Alfonso, were the only mourners. Employees of the funeral home served as pall bearers. Family members in Europe sent floral arrangements, as did Don Alfonso's Cuban doctors and the staff of the Colonial Hotel.

At the coroner's inquest, Millie Gaydon was absolved of the manslaughter charges and she quickly disappeared from the front pages of the world's newspapers. Initially she remained in Miami, then moved to New Mexico, where she joined the U.S. Women's Army Corps during World War II.

During the 1950s, three of Don Alfonso's siblings visited his grave during Miami stops while visiting the U.S. and Cuba. Following the 1975 restoration of the Borbón dynasty in Spain after Francisco Franco's death, King Juan Carlos, Don Alfonso's nephew, began making plans to bring back to Spain the bodies of all the Spanish royals who had died in exile. But before that could happen, the royal pantheon at El Escorial, outside Madrid, had to be expanded.

King Alfonso XIII's body was repatriated from Italy in 1980. In 1985 the other tombs were ready,

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and in a carefully timed ceremony, the royal remains were flown in over two days: Queen Victoria Eugenia from England, the Infante Gonzalo from Austria, the Infante Jaime from Switzerland, and Don Alfonso from Miami.

Col. Luis Fernandez de Mesa y de Hoas, special envoy from Don Juan de Borbón, Don Alfonso's brother, arranged for Rivero Funeral Home to exhume and ship Don Alfonso's body to El Escorial. According to the funeral home's Enrique Rivero, when the crypt was opened on the morning of April 23, 1985, Don Alfonso's remains were revealed to have not completely decomposed, and fragments of the white sharkskin suit remained. The body was transferred to a coffin and a wake was held that evening at Rivero Funeral Home on SW 8th Street, where the rosary was recited before many local dignitaries, as well as Doña Edelmira, who had moved to Miami after the Cuban revolution.

The following day, Don Alfonso was escorted to Miami International Airport by a motorcycle honor guard of officers representing every police department in Miami-Dade County. While the Spanish Consul, Emilio Marti Martiny, and Colonel Fernandez watched, the coffin was loaded into the cargo hold of an Iberia 747 and flown overnight to Madrid. On April 25, 1985, Don Alfonso was finally laid to rest with all the honors due a crown prince of Spain.

Doña Edelmira remained in touch with the royal family, and despite her divorce, retained the title Countess Covadonga. She died in Miami in 1994, as had Marta Rocafort a year earlier. Neither was buried in Don Alfonso's crypt, which, according to José Vera of Graceland Memorial Park, remains empty and the property of Don Alfonso's estate.

The fate of Mildred "Merry Millie" Gaydon could not be determined. If still alive, she would now be 95 years old.

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