

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“A man’s life is interesting primarily when he has failed - I well know. For it’s a sign that he tried to surpass himself.”

George Clemenceau

SLIDELL, JULY 31, 1965 . . .

“ . . . so the whole damned trip was wasted; he must have been out of his mind nearly all day, because everything he shot was ruined.

“It was damned good stuff, too, or it would have been, if it had been filmed properly; those aren’t the largest canyons I’ve ever seen, by a long sight, but they’re almost ideal for our purposes.”

“What were you doing? Exactly?”

“Oh, McGee, a lot of things, anything we could think of, the more spectacular the better, and some of it was damned spectacular; flying right up to the end of a blind box-canyon, then escaping by doing a half loop with a roll on top; flying through places where the canyon is actually narrower than the wingspan, lifting one wing over rocks on one side of the canyon while ducking the other wing under overhanging rocks on the other side. Stuff like that.

“On one flight I touched both wing tips; when I landed, one clearance light was gone entirely, and a tree limb was shoved between the other clearance light and the wingtip. On another flight I hit the camera Herbert was filming with; I intended to miss it by about four inches, by raising the left wing over it at the last split-second, but I forgot about the aileron, and that slight movement of the control surface caused me to hit.

“It was such a light touch that it just cut a slit in the thin plastic cover on the film magazine, and it didn’t do any real damage at all, but it was too close for comfort. Herbert stood right there, while the wing missed his head by about an inch; he said later that he thought it would hit him right in the mouth, but he didn’t even duck his head. With his usual inconsistency of thought, he’ll trust me to do anything, but he won’t believe a thing I tell him.

“He sincerely believes that any sign of weakness, however slight, is less than manly, and his ‘image’ is the most important thing in the world to him. That’s why he had the heat stroke; he was deathly sick, but he didn’t want us to see him vomiting, so instead of telling us he was sick and asking for help, he sneaked off in an attempt to conceal what he considered a sign of weakness.

“When we found him, he was rolling on the ground in violent spasms, with his feet and hands clenched into knots, and don’t tell me that you can’t clench your feet, Herbert was doing it, he’d vomited and then started biting the ground and a cactus plant, and his mouth was almost completely filled with dirt, small rocks, and pieces of cactus. His lips and face were covered with spines from the cactus, hundreds of spines.

“We cleaned out his mouth and nose and carried him back to the shade under the truck, the only shade for miles, and then, when he was a bit better, shoved him in the plane and took him to Del Rio. I called ahead on the radio and had an ambulance meet him at the airport, and he was in the hospital less than an hour after we found him.

“Then, when I saw the results of the filming, I was almost sick. Part of the film, the stuff I shot, was fine; but almost everything Herbert did was ruined. We had the jaguar with us, and we intended to film him against the background of the canyons, but even that was wasted effort; he wasn’t just about to burn his tender feet on the hot rocks simply to please us, and he didn’t either. He stood in the shade of the camera, and it was completely impossible to get him to move, if we moved the camera, he promptly moved back into its shade, and that was that.

“So, on the next trip, I want to do the filming myself, and I’ll need somebody else to do the flying, that’s where you come in.”

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“Well, I can’t stay now, I’ve got to go on to California in the morning; but I can be back in about a week, if that’s quick enough, or a bit sooner if I have to.”

“No, that’ll be fine; I’m taking Joyce up to visit her mother tomorrow, and we won’t be back for several days anyway, so anytime in the next two weeks will be soon enough. Now about the jaguar . . .”

“Jones, I’m telling you, that damn thing will kill somebody; if I hadn’t got that door closed when I did, I’d be first on the list.”

“Well, since you’ll be here for a while, maybe I better tell you what’s safe.”

“Never mind about that, tell me what’s not safe.”

“You’ve already learned about the potatoes, so I won’t go into that, but there are one or two other points. He can change from a completely calm, playful pet to a, well, you’ve already seen that too. But, anyway, he can change so fast, and so completely, that it’s a bit frightening, especially if it’s you he’s after.”

“Yeah, I noticed that.”

“One point though, McGee, Ya Ya can handle him no matter what happens; he thinks she’s his mother, and . . .”

“That’s fine, just as long as he doesn’t think I’m his supper.”

“These sudden rages are usually brought on when he decides he wants something, then instantly assumes that anybody around is a threat. It isn’t necessary to actually threaten him, either, just being there at the wrong time is enough to mark you, in his mind, as an enemy, and his idea of defense is immediate attack. And that’s a bit deceptive, he looks clumsy when he’s charging, something between a stumble and a gallop, but it’s damned fast, and it’s anything but clumsy. He just looks clumsy, because he’s so heavy, and because his feet are so big.

“A woman from New Orleans was sitting next to the kitchen table one night and the jaguar was in the far end of the hall, it was right after we’d finished eating and the table hadn’t been cleared yet; we were talking, and then, suddenly, the cat started charging down the hall, and it was damned clear what he had on his mind, and he was heading straight for the woman. She took one brief look in his direction, damned brief, and then jumped clear over the kitchen table, lengthwise, and without touching the table or disturbing anything on it.

“Joyce’s reactions were pretty good that night too; she was out the door about one step behind the other woman. They both jumped in my car, for a second or two, then practically exploded out the other side and raced off down the street; when they got in the car, Joyce sat on a snake that escaped from a sack on the trip back from Texas.

“A few weeks ago, on a trip in Florida, the kids took him swimming in a big lake; they took him out in the middle in a boat, pushed him out, and then jumped in after him, and he loved it. He’d swim around till he got tired, then swim up to one of the kids, put his paws on their shoulders and rest. He’s been bathing with Ya Ya in the bathtub since he was a baby, and he slept in the same bed with her until Joyce got here.

“He’s intelligent as Hell, too; he learned to open a normal door before he was big enough to reach the knob. He’d jump into the air, place one paw on either side of the knob, and then turn the knob by pushing up with one foot while pulling down with the other one; then, after he twisted the knob, he had to exert a pull towards himself to open the door, and then get out of the way quick enough to permit the door’s inward swing, all in the brief instant he was hanging in mid-air at the top of a short jump.”

“Fortunately, he’s afraid of moving cars, unless he’s inside them, so he avoids the street, and he seldom goes out of the yard; he seems to know the property limits and he stays inside them. But that’s not too unusual, even dogs do that, and he’s a Hell of a lot smarter than any dog that ever lived. We did have a problem for a while, though; the guy next door was keeping a goose in his back yard, and the jaguar kept slipping over there and trying to eat the goose. But he got rid of the goose, so that solved the problem.

“There’s one rather useful side benefit to keeping a jaguar, though; you don’t have any trouble with dogs, they avoid this whole end of town. We’re not bothered too much by salesmen, either; at least not by the same ones twice.”

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“Jones, if you’ll put him in it, I’ll personally build that cat the finest cage you ever saw . . . ”

THIRTY MINUTES LATER . . .

“ . . . anyway, McGee, that’s the way it stands at the moment. But it’s not just Joyce, although she’s the focus of the problem; Herbert and Bill are almost as bad as she is.

“Later, you have a tendency to remember only the more outrageous things, and you find it difficult to justify having put up with such people, even briefly; so it’s hard to describe my position in relation to them, although, in Joyce’s case, that should be obvious, I’m trying to help her.

“Joyce was preached to for years by her mother, and all she got out of that was the feeling that she can’t speak honestly to anyone; so I hoped, by being completely honest with her, to make her realize that a lot of the things she wants to do will simply lead to trouble. But, in any case, she’s far too intelligent to be treated like a child.

“I only wish I was in a position to understand what’s going on even half as well as she does; but she does have an advantage, I’m being honest with her. One of her problems is an almost complete lack of self confidence; but it’s damned hard to build up somebody’s ego while you’re being forced to beat them into the ground in self defense. Joyce may not be the most difficult person alive, but if she’s not, then I don’t want to meet whoever is.”

“Well, Jones, I’m sorry it turned out this way, and I think I’ve got a reasonably fair idea of what you’re going through; so I’ll do what I can to get along with her, but in any case, I won’t act like Herbert or Bill . . . ”

THAT NIGHT . . .

“ . . . Joyce, will you kindly be good enough to keep your nose out of things that you know absolutely nothing about?”

“But I do know all . . . ”

“You have no more idea of what you’re talking about than a goat.”

“Well, I like that.”

“Now, now, children. You sound just like your old man did when he was your age, Joyce.”

“She doesn’t, you know.”

“Tell me, Jones, what ever happened to Johnny? Is he still with Trudy?”

“Johnny’s dead, McGee. He shot himself, no, wait a minute, he didn’t; he killed himself with monoxide poisoning.”

“Why? What happened? That doesn’t sound like Johnny at all.”

“Oh, just one of those stupid God damned things, probably a lot of things, really. Trudy blamed it on something that happened at the zoo, but I don’t think that was enough by itself. He skinned out a big monkey, or a baboon or something, one that died at the zoo. Then, later, they learned that it died of some rare tropical disease from India or something, so Johnny got worried that he’d caught it, got to brooding about it, and killed himself.”

“Who was Johnny?”

“He was a friend of mine, Joyce, and a friend of McGee’s; I told you a little about him the other night, he was with me on that trip when we had all the trouble with the snakes and monkeys, at Pedro’s house.”

“Tell me about him.”

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“Joyce, how can you tell somebody about a man in a few sentences?”

“Try.”

“Go ahead, Jones, I’d like to hear what you’d say, too.”

“Well, Johnny was a friend of mine, and he was a thief, he’d steal anything that wasn’t nailed down, and he carried a wrecking bar for those situations. Some years ago, at a time when flamingos, big pink birds from South America . . .”

“I know what a flamingo is.”

“O. K., at a time when flamingos were hard to get, and expensive, Johnny and another guy were driving from Tarpon Springs to Miami and they saw a flamingo in a small lake in front of a guy’s house. So they decided to steal it. It was broad daylight at the time, so they had to get it on their way back from Miami, at night.

“Late that night, when they arrived back at the lake, they were almost in a complete drunken stupor, but they went right ahead with the plan to steal the flamingo anyway. The house was completely dark, and the flamingo was still out in the middle of the lake, so everything seemed to be perfect; until they tried wading out into the lake. The bottom of the lake, instead of the firm sand they were expecting, was black, gumbo mud, and it was damned near impossible to unstick their feet every time they took a step.

“It took almost half an hour to reach the flamingo, which seemed totally unaware of their floundering approach, and then, finally, covered from head to toe with mud, and almost exhausted from struggling through the sticky bottom of the lake, they got close enough to pounce on the flamingo. It was a steel and concrete flamingo, a lawn ornament, a statue.

“But the dogs that they woke up when they pounced on the flamingo weren’t made out of steel and concrete, and the shotgun that the owner of the house produced was no lawn ornament.

“Their trip back out of the lake was a Hell of a lot faster than their trip going in after the flamingo, in spite of the sticky mud, and a liberal sprinkling of bird shot probably did quite a bit to speed up their exit from the water. But once they reached the bank, they still had quite a lot of ground to cover to their truck, and the dogs were anxiously awaiting their arrival on solid ground.

“When they did reach their truck, they were almost completely naked, having lost their shoes in the mud and most of their clothes either to the dogs or in a barbed wire fence, they were thoroughly peppered with bird shot from the shotgun, had been bitten repeatedly by the dogs, and were pretty badly ripped up from going through the barbed wire fence in a Hell of a hurry.

“Later, when Johnny told me about it, he said, ‘Hell, man, it was almost enough to make a man give up stealing.’”