

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“My balls are not crystal.”

Anon.

In December of 1949, I read a book called *The Big Con*, which was a detailed account of the escapades of a number of con men; a later movie, *The Sting*, was obviously based upon that book. A few months later, in the spring of 1950, I met the first con man I ever knew, James G. ‘Bo’ Miller, the youngest of four brothers who described themselves as ‘thieves’ when talking to friends. Bo was one of the most remarkable men I ever knew.

I had established an exhibit and compound for snakes and animals at the intersection of highways 66 and 77, northeast of Oklahoma City; nearby a man named Cortiss Henderson opened what such people were then calling a ‘Free Zoo,’ which was a front for a crooked gambling establishment.

They put signs up and down the highway saying things like “See the giant rattlesnakes,” or “See the 500 pound Canary” (a donkey) or “See the Chinese Dragon” (an iguana lizard) and so on. The ‘zoo’ itself might be inside a small, rented building, or inside a rough wooden fence made from slabs, the outsides of a log that are cut away when a tree is first squared up before being sawed into boards, and typically there would be ten or twelve small cages, each containing some kind of small wild animal. But one thing never varied: situated in the open, in front of the entrance to the zoo, would be a so-called ‘snake pit’ constructed from four sheets of four by eight foot plywood; inside the pit would be several large rattlesnakes.

Everything was advertised as being free, and attached to a post or a tree would be a fruit jar with a sign on it asking visitors to make donations to help feed the animals. Income from such donations seldom amounted to more than three or four dollars a day; which mattered not at all, because the real source of income routinely generated several thousand dollars a day.

Parked in front of the zoo would be several large cars, Cadillacs, Buicks, Chryslers and other expensive cars, all with out-of-state tags, all with fancy suitcases or golf bags, or both, in plain sight on their back seats; to an incoming tourist who stopped to see the free zoo, all of these cars would appear to belong to other tourists, quite well-off tourists by all appearances.

Standing around the pit, looking at the snakes, would be a group of four or five men, all but one looking like other tourists; the one exception being a man wearing overalls and a straw hat, ostensibly the owner of the free zoo, who would be telling the men who looked like tourists all about the snakes.

When a real tourist stopped and joined the group, the other men would appear to ignore him at first; apparently being interested only in hearing about the snakes. But in the course of the discussion with the zoo owner, the original tourists would start telling stories about the snakes where they came from; stories which rather naturally led to other things, where they were from, where they were going, what business they were in.

The result being that within a few minutes after his arrival on the scene the real tourist would tell the other men all they needed to know about him; and they would get all of this required information without the need to ask him a single question. They did not have to ask him, he would volunteer the information in an attempt to become a part of the conversation. All of the men standing around that pit when the tourist arrived were master psychologists, although most of them never finished high school. Any one of them could have had Sigmund Freud climbing the walls within a matter of a few minutes.

But, during the conversation around the pit, one of the men would remain silent, would appear to be almost asleep; then, if the real tourist failed the test he was being given, if he did not appear to be a suitable ‘mark,’ or victim, the previously quiet man would suddenly become very vocal, would be, from all appearances, a very mean drunk who

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would start cursing and making threats. If the real tourist did not appear to be a good mark then they wanted to get rid of him as quickly as possible.

But if he passed the test, things proceeded differently; the idea being to get him into a small room near the rear of the zoo, involve him in a crooked gambling game, and take almost all of the money he had on him. Not all of his money, they always left a mark with at least a few dollars because they did not want him to panic afterwards. This was before the days of credit cards, and many tourists carried surprisingly large amounts of cash on them.

In order to get the mark into a small room in the rear of the zoo where the gambling game was conducted, the man in the straw hat would lead the group there ostensibly to show them a coral snake; and the most striking feature of the room was the fact that the walls were hung with large and very elaborately patterned Indian blankets. When one of the shills who had been standing around the snake pit when the mark arrived tried to buy one of the Indian blankets he was told that they were not for sale, that the blankets were used only for trading with the local Indians for snakes; and that this trading was done with the use of a game that the Indians liked to play.

Which, of course, led to a demonstration of the game, and an attempt on the part of the shill to win a blanket by playing the game. All such games are rigged in a fashion that makes it impossible to win; using dice, the player must throw a number that is impossible to produce with the set of dice being used. But throwing that number once does not mean that the player has won, it supposedly means that he then cannot lose; to win, he must throw the same number again.

The house gave the player odds of two to one, for every dollar the player put down as a bet the house put down two dollars; and each time the player threw the dice the bets were doubled, so the amount of money in play increased very rapidly. Having been enticed into the game, the mark was then led to believe that he had rolled the supposedly 'magic' number on his first throw of the dice; which, according to the rules explained to him, meant that he then could not lose if he simply continued to play. But to win he must eventually roll the magic number again, which was impossible to do; then, when he ran out of money, or refused to increase the size of his bets any more, he lost.

Usually, if a mark refused to continue playing after losing less than \$640.00, they would hand all of his money back to him, and then say something like . . . "Well, it's a good thing this was just a demonstration, if it had been a real game you would have lost. Here's your money, have a nice trip."

But if a mark lost more than a previously agreed upon minimum, then they did not return his money. Another important consideration being the fact that the mark was not the only loser, all of the others except the owner of the zoo lost money, and all of the others lost more than the mark. Then as they were all leaving, the others would make it clear that while they hated to lose it was merely a matter of bad luck and they had no hard feelings.

And when the mark departed he did not go alone, a man that he had never seen before would follow him in a car that he had never seen before. If he continued on his trip, making no attempt to contact the police or make a phone call, the man following him would continue the pursuit for whatever distance was considered safe, without making contact.

But if the mark did try to approach the police, or make a phone call, the man behind him would immediately make contact; would ask him if he had been involved in a gambling game, and then identify himself as the real owner of the zoo. Tell the mark that he had been suspicious about the man in the straw hat and now had the required proof; would ask the mark how much he lost, and then immediately hand it over in cash. Not infrequently, a mark would claim to have lost more than he really did, but it would be returned to him regardless of the truth of his statement. Then the 'real' owner would thank the mark for his cooperation and leave; having dropped a few hints to the effect that he hoped it would not be necessary to call the mark as a witness in a criminal case against the man in the straw hat.

During the period that I observed Henderson's operation, they seldom netted less than \$10,000.00 a day, and sometimes a lot more. After paying all of the required bribes and their very low operating expenses, these men were earning at least a thousand dollars a day, each.

As I learned later, there were at least fifty such places operating in various places around the country, and some were far more lucrative than that one in Oklahoma.

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Eventually, through my contacts with Henderson, I became the only source of supply for snakes and animals for all of the free zoos then operating in the country; they were some of the best customers I ever had, paid top dollar for everything they bought and paid in cash. Within less than six months, I was generating income at an annual rate of more than \$50,000.00 from these people. They were not my biggest customers, but were among the 'best' because they never gave me problems of any kind.

All of these people were professional criminals, but they were also some of the smartest people I ever met; and, to a man, they were as tough as a boot, would fight a buzz saw. Which does not mean that they were 'toughs;' quite the contrary, they appeared to be very polished gentlemen indeed, could pass without question in the best company, and frequently did.

Most of the men working with Henderson were in their forties or fifties, Bo Miller was the youngest, then in his early thirties. Among other duties, Bo was the 'patch' for the Henderson operation, he purchased protection from the authorities and paid the required bribes to everybody from the governor of the state where they were working on down to the local police; such operations could not have remained in business very long without this protection, and they were never bothered so long as they avoided negative publicity in the local press.

That book that I read a few months earlier, *The Big Con*, went into great detail about the inside workings of all sorts of con games, and made it very clear that bribing officials was an absolute requirement; but one thing that sparked my curiosity was not explained in the book, that being just how you could approach the authorities without leaving yourself open to a charge of soliciting a bribe.

So I asked Bo about this, and he said . . . "Oh, that's the easiest thing in the world; you never offer a bribe. Instead, you arrange a meeting and then ask for a private discussion 'off the record,' and if they agree to this, and I never heard of anybody who would not agree to it, that means that anything you say cannot be used against you. Which does not mean that they will always accept your offer, but does mean that they will at least consider it; and also means that you are not putting yourself at risk."

Starting that same year, and continuing for a period of several years afterwards, I had a lot of experience with the so-called 'mordida' (the bite, or bribe) in Mexico. And while I have very little confidence in the so-called 'code of honor among thieves,' there was a very clear code concerning bribery in Mexico in those days; you had to make the offer in a certain manner, and any meaningful departure from the established code might get you arrested, or even killed.

If, for example, the first offer was refused, the natural inclination would be to increase the offer; but doing so was a terrible mistake, might well be a fatal mistake. A refusal to accept a bribe, in those days in Mexico, did not mean that your offer was too low, it meant that the official involved was not in a position to do what you were asking him to do, and he would not accept a bribe if he could not live up to his end of the arrangement. Thus an offer to increase the bribe appeared, to the Mexican, to be a mortal insult to his integrity. If, instead, the offered bribe was too low, then he would have said so.

On several occasions I had bribes returned to me, in cases where the bribed man later found that he could not do what I was asking him to do; the then clearly understood code concerning such matters required him to return the bribe, and he would since it was looked upon as a matter of personal honor.

Over a period of several years I established animal and reptile collecting compounds in several places in Mexico and exported millions of dollars worth of such wildlife to this country; all of which operations were perfectly legal in this country, but all of which was highly illegal in Mexico. Starting in 1951, the laws concerning wildlife of any kind were very strict in Mexico; any commercial utilization of wildlife was totally prohibited. If enforced to the letter of the law, which it never was, it would have been illegal to recapture a cow that had escaped from a pasture; this being the case because the law stated . . . "These laws apply to all native Mexican animals, birds, reptiles and insects, and to any animals that are not native to Mexico but that have escaped from captivity and started to run loose in Mexican territory."

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So my operations were always illegal in Mexico after 1951, but if you could get the animals out of Mexico and into this country, provided that the required import duties were paid at the border, then you were home free. But, later, that situation changed; a law was passed in this country that stated that anything that was illegal to export from another country would then be illegal to import into this country. When that law went into effect I ceased my operations.

In 1962, I imported forty-three Orang Utans from Singapore, together with literally thousands of other animals, birds and reptiles, including several tons of very large pythons; all of which exports, except for the Orang Utans, were legal for exportation from Singapore.

Orang Utans are not native to Singapore, come from Borneo and Sumatra, but at that time there were a lot of Orangs in captivity in Singapore, and it was legal to have them there but it was not legal to export them. I applied for a permit to export them from Singapore, but it was refused; they told me . . . “If you want Orang Utans, then go to Indonesia and apply for a permit to capture and export them.” Which, I knew, would be an exercise in futility; so I did what I had to do under the circumstances.

My agent in Singapore, a Chinese man named William Chan, arranged the exportation of the Orangs in a manner that appeared to be perfectly safe for everybody involved. He packed the Orangs into shipping crates that made it impossible to see what was inside the crates without opening them, marked the crates ‘monkeys,’ which could be legally exported, and shipped them by air using Japan Airlines. But when these crates were loaded onto the airplane they had nothing in the way of documentation, neither the shipper nor intended destination were marked on the crates; thus, if they were discovered by the authorities, it would be impossible for them to determine where they came from or where they were going. All of the required labels and documents were given to the steward on the flight, and if the plane reached Tokyo without the Orangs being discovered, and this always happened, then the steward would put the labels and documents with the shipment before it was transferred to another airline for shipment on to this country.

But, just to play it on the safe side, the labels that were placed on the shipment in Tokyo listed the destination as Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi, and the consignee as Professor Herbert Prechtel. The actual destination was New Orleans, that being the closest international airport to Bay Saint Louis, the idea being that if the Singapore authorities did manage to discover where the Orangs were going they probably would not understand the close proximity of Mississippi to Louisiana. And Herbert, far from being a professor, was a twenty-year-old German boy who worked for me. Still, the whole operation was perfectly legal on our end of the line. And very profitable; my deal with Chan required him to obtain and ship the Orangs without charge to me, and then I paid shipping costs and import duties on my end and then sent Chan half of the income produced by sale of the Orangs. Orangs, at the time, were in great demand, and sold for relatively high prices.

Then having just completed construction and stocking of a zoo for the city of Monroe, Louisiana, I was a member of the Zoo Director’s Association, and I attended an annual meeting of this organization in the fall of 1962; at that meeting, the Director of the Bronx Zoo, a real asshole, who just happened to have the largest collection of captive Orangs then in this country, and who was successfully breeding them and wanted to establish a monopoly in the market for Orangs, made a speech telling the other zoo directors that the importation of Orangs should be prohibited and that until and unless such a law could be passed that all of them should refuse to buy Orangs from anybody except another established zoo.

Far from hurting me, that speech helped me; because, as they came out of the room where the speech was delivered, several zoo directors immediately approached me and I got orders for a total of twenty-three Orangs. While the other zoo directors pretended to agree with the speaker, they clearly understood exactly what he was trying to pull; if the importation of Orangs was prohibited, then the price of Orangs would go through the roof, so they wanted to buy them while the price was still reasonable.

Following that speech, I almost had a fist-fight with the Bronx Zoo director; offered to whip his ass, but he declined the offer. A group of us were sitting around in a bar talking, and the Bronx director starting telling us about his plans for an upcoming expedition to Africa; he intended, he said, to kill 500 African elephants in order to examine their stomach contents to determine what they were eating.

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So I told him that you did not have to kill an elephant in order to find out what it was eating; all you had to do was follow it around and see what it was eating. Then added . . . “But, if you insist upon examining stomach contents, then you still don’t have to kill any elephants in order to do so; because there are several large-scale elephant slaughter programs being conducted in Africa at the moment, where they are killings thousands of elephants in order to reduce what they consider to be an overpopulation of elephants; so all you have to do is examine the stomach contents of the elephants that are being killed by somebody else.”

Which suggestion did not suit his purposes, of course; he couldn’t care less about the stomach contents of an elephant, all he was really interested in was a big adventure at somebody else’s expense; an adventure that he could rationalize on the grounds of it being a ‘scientific study.’

I had already been directly involved in such elephant slaughter programs, had personally killed more than 600 African elephants; an activity that I was already regretting, because I had begun to suspect that such programs were not necessary, that no actual overpopulation of elephants existed, that, as usual, the ‘scientists’ had fucked things up yet again. Which, as it happened, turned out to be true.

By that point in my life I had been producing television shows for more than five years, shows detailing my work with wild animals all over the world; the Bronx director, of course, had seen many of these shows, and he was jealous as Hell. After all, in his mind, he was the real ‘expert,’ and he was getting little or no publicity; while I, an ‘outsider,’ was getting enormous publicity. Besides, he was also convinced that I was getting filthy rich making television shows and selling animals, while he was forced to get by on what he considered to be an unfairly low income.

With very few exceptions, I did not like zoo directors as a group; in my experiences with them I found them to be incompetent, dishonest, lazy and arrogant. The worst of the lot was Marlin Perkins, who later produced the television series called Wild Kingdom. He attempted to copy films that I had produced, and in several cases released films that were outright copies of my films, scene by scene copies.

So, during that conversation, one thing led to another and finally reached a point where I offered to take the Bronx director out into the street and whip him. Since then, he has not been my greatest admirer, and has gone to rather great lengths in his attempts to hurt me in any way he could.

During my life I have been involved in far more violence than most men, but have never been attracted to violence; have, instead, tried to avoid it if at all possible, but it appears that some men attract violence, and I seem to have that problem. I never took a drink in my life until I was more than sixty years old, usually avoided bars or anyplace else that other people might be drinking like the plague; because I learned very young that drinking frequently leads to violence. But, when faced with an obvious threat that appeared to be leading in the direction of violence, I always knew what to do: make your move first, without warning, and don’t stop until no slightest possibility of continued threat exists.

In another conversation with Bo Miller, he told me about an incident that occurred when he threw three dice out onto the table during a crooked dice game. So then I asked him what he said when he had been caught cheating.

And he replied . . . “What did I say? Listen, there is a time to talk and a time to fight; and when you throw three dice out onto the table that is not the time to talk.”

Bo was the pilot of heavy bombers during the Second World War, flew more than fifty missions out of North Africa and Italy; and when he returned to this country at the end of the war it required three men to carry his cash winnings off the ship that he came back on, money he made in crooked poker games and crooked dice games. He was able to get by with such cheating on a massive scale by involving his commanding officer, then Colonel, later General, Travis; the man after whom Travis Airforce Base was later named. Bo always managed to arrange things so that the Colonel was a winner as well, and nobody dared question the Colonel.

The very fact that Bo was able to get a commission in the then Army Air Corps was almost a miracle, because he was a convicted criminal serving hard time in a Texas penitentiary at the start of the war; was convicted of armed robbery at the age of seventeen. And while he was guilty of the crime that he was accused of, he was convicted on

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perjured testimony; one of the witnesses for the prosecution testified that he could identify Bo both from his face and his voice; when, in fact, he never saw Bo's face or heard his voice, since Bo was wearing a black mask that covered his entire face and never spoke during the robbery. As Bo said . . . "When you stick a .45 in their face you don't have to say anything, they know what you mean."

But, shortly after the start of the war, Bo's older brother bribed the Governor of the State of Texas to release him so that he could go into the armed services. Thousands of men were released from prisons all over the country for that purpose during the war; but then their service records were tagged with a bright red warning on the cover, 'CONVICTED CRIMINAL.'

With that warning on his service records, the fact that Bo was able to get accepted for flight training, which led to a commission as an officer, clearly established both his intelligence and his ability to influence people. Near the end of his military flying career, Colonel Travis called Bo into his office, took Bo's service records and removed the warning from the cover; telling Bo . . . "I think this has hounded you long enough."

Bo's military record was, in fact, outstanding: on one occasion he was assigned to lead a large flight of bombers on a very dangerous mission over German occupied Europe, was given that assignment because his commanding officer was convinced that Bo would not abort the mission under any circumstances. The airplane he piloted on that mission was just short of establishing a record for the largest number of missions without an abort, but the crew of that plane was badly shot up on its most recent mission with little damage to the bomber, while Bo's airplane on the same mission was badly damaged with little damage to its crew. So he changed planes for that mission, and then did something that is probably without precedent: having reached the target, the bomb-bay doors on Bo's plane would not open in a normal fashion, so he could not drop his bombs. But, after the bombing run was completed, and when the rest of the flight turned back in the direction of their home base, Bo cranked the bomb-bay doors open by hand, turned around and went back to bomb the target solo.

Which was dangerous as Hell: because, the first time over the target the people on the ground managing the defenses were frequently taken by surprise, were dodging the bombs dropped from a hundred or more planes, and had numerous targets in the sky to shoot at. But on Bo's second pass above the target they were no longer surprised, were not dodging bombs from many airplanes, and had only one target to aim at. Bo's airplane was literally shot to pieces, but it was not shot down. I saw pictures of that plane that were taken after it returned from that mission; there was a hole in the fuselage that was so big that it looked like you could drive a car through it; the tail end was almost cut in two.

I was not forced to base my opinions about Bo's flying experience on Bo's accounts, in fact he had almost nothing to say on the subject; but I also knew his copilot on that mission, Ray Olive, and several other members of the crew. In fact, Ray Olive worked for me for many years, right up until the time that he died, and he had hundreds of pictures that were taken before, during, and after their missions over Europe. Eleven years after I met Bo, he made a trip with me to Africa, and enroute to Africa we stopped off briefly in Munich, Germany, and I asked Bo if he had ever been in Munich before. And he said . . . "Oh, yes, I have been here many times before; but I never landed."

On that trip to Africa we were filming, among other things, an elephant slaughter program; hunting that has absolutely nothing to do with sport. Instead of trying to stalk and kill large bull elephants with big tusks, the normal practice while sport hunting, you select a herd and then kill every member of the herd, bulls, cows and even babies. Which, supposedly, according to the 'experts,' assures that the numbers of elephants will be reduced in proper proportion. Properly performed, by people who know what they are doing, a herd of fifty or more elephants will be wiped out in less than one minute; it happens so fast that you have to see it to believe it. One minute a herd is moving along through the bush, and less than a minute later every member of the herd is dead. One shot, one elephant, and with five or more men shooting simultaneously it is finished very quickly.

At that time I believed that such slaughter programs were needed in order to protect the overall environment, and while I did not enjoy it I was willing to take part because I believed it was necessary. Bo was attracted because he had been an avid hunter throughout most of his life, hunted deer in Texas every year, and had always wanted to conduct a hunt for big game in Africa.

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On that trip, Bo did most of the shooting while I was filming the operation; on one occasion I was filming from a helicopter that we used to drive a herd towards the shooters that were positioned ahead of the herd. Bo was standing in the middle of a small clearing waiting for the oncoming elephants when a big bull broke out of the trees that surrounded the clearing, a bull that had managed to outrun the rest of the herd and was well in the lead. Bo and the big bull were suddenly face to face at a distance of about twenty feet, with the bull coming towards him at a high rate of speed, not charging him but just running like Hell. Bo raised his gun and shot the bull in the head; whereupon the bull reared up on its hind legs like a horse in a circus, literally towering above Bo at a distance of about five feet. Then it turned in an arc of 180 degrees so that it was then facing directly away from Bo; the result being that by the time Bo fired a second shot he was forced to shoot the elephant directly in the ass.

I was directly above the clearing in the helicopter, at a low altitude, and I captured the whole thing on film. Then, later, I told Bo . . . “Now all I need is a few scenes of an elephant quietly grazing, some scenes of you sneaking through the grass, and then the scene of you shooting him in the ass. Properly edited together, that sequence will put FINISH to your reputation as a hunter.”

I was joking, but Bo did not seem to feel that my suggestion was really very funny.

When I first met Bo, in 1950, several people in the business of operating free zoos as fronts for crooked gambling schemes began to realize that there was a potential source of very meaningful income from the operation of legitimate exhibits; they arrived at this conclusion because in several of the locations where they had established free zoos, there were far too many tourists, so many people were stopping that they could not operate the crooked gambling games.

So, in the spring of 1950, the Miller brothers opened the first of several legitimate exhibits in Gatlinburg, Tennessee; a location which had, at that time, several million tourists each year, and which had almost nothing in the way of anything for the tourists to see or do. Their total investment in that first legitimate exhibit was less than five-hundred dollars, and most of that expense was for the whiskey they drank while building the place. A fence around the place was built with slabs from a local sawmill that they bought for one dollar a truckload, a couple of rolls of chicken wire and a few nails. Inside the exhibit they had about ten small cages of animals; things like a rabbit, a chicken, a squirrel or a porcupine. Nothing unusual and nothing expensive. Their signs along the road were made by painting on the rear of stolen Coca Cola signs.

But when they opened the exhibit for the first time the tourists came by the thousands, would be there long before dawn trying to peek through cracks in the fence and would have been still coming in great numbers at midnight if they had stayed open that late; which they could not do since they had no lights.

This exhibit was operated as a ‘ding joint,’ a carnival term that means a place that does not charge an admission fee but instead asks for donations. But, unlike the free zoos, this was not done by hanging a jar on a post with a sign soliciting donations to feed the animals; instead, the tourists were herded through narrow aisles until they suddenly came face to face with the ‘ding booth,’ where somebody, usually a woman, would be seated behind a counter and would ask the tourist to make a donation. Which asking was not done in a polite manner; instead, was done in such an intimidating manner that very few tourists dared to pass by without making a meaningful donation. The money came in so fast that it took two people to carry it away at the end of the day, thousands of dollars a day, most of it in the form of one-dollar bills or fifty-cent pieces; anybody who donated less than fifty cents got such a tongue lashing that everybody behind them in the line that heard it would not dare to offer a small donation.

Shortly after opening this place, they added a snake exhibit that was enclosed inside another fence in the center of the exhibit, and they did charge for admission to the snake exhibit. So, rather than being free, as advertised, tourists were first almost forced to make a donation and then had to pay for admission to the snake exhibit.

R. A. Miller, Bo’s oldest brother, after he first visited the place, made this comment . . . “I believe that Clara (Bo’s wife, who was operating the ding booth) should make a mark on every tourist that she does not have a fight with; that way, the guy running the snake exhibit can jump on somebody else. The way it is now, some people get into two fights and some people don’t get into even one fight; in order to be fair about it, I think we should arrange things so that there is only one fight per customer.”

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A friend of the Millers, another con man, after visiting the place for the first time, had this to say . . . “The only suggestion that I can make in the direction of increasing the income is for you to hire a stickup man to rob the tourists as they are leaving.”

To which R. A. Miller replied . . . “Well, we considered that; but when we looked into the situation we realized that the tourists would not have enough money left by the time they reached the exit to pay for the stickup man’s salary.”

During their first year of operation in that location the Miller brothers paid the land owner a rent of fifty dollars; could probably have purchased the land for less than five hundred dollars before the place was opened, but could not have purchased it for a hundred thousand dollars after the land owner saw the income that was generated. So the Miller brothers made some serious mistakes, too.

Within a period of about two weeks, once they saw the potential of the place in Gatlinburg, they opened a second exhibit about forty miles to the east, on the same highway but on the other side of the mountains; and this second exhibit did equally well. Throughout the remainder of their first tourist season, they conducted so-called ‘rattlesnake milking’ demonstrations in both places; a demonstration that involves picking up the snake by its head, opening its mouth, exposing the fangs and then squeezing the venom out through the hollow fangs. But rattlesnakes are in many ways very delicate creatures, are very nervous in captivity, and when handled in that manner will be dead within a couple of days; so this meant that they had to have a steady supply of rattlesnakes, and I sold them several thousand rattlesnakes during their first season.

What the Miller brothers should have done, but which they did not do, once they realized the real potential, was to close the place for a few weeks, buy a large chunk of local land, and then spend the next couple of weeks working around the clock to build a much larger exhibit; had they done so, their profits for the first season would have run into the millions of dollars; but, instead, they continued throughout the season with the same small exhibit that they started with, and instead of millions of dollars they made only about a quarter of a million dollars in profit that first season.

Even during their second season they did not seem to clearly understand the real potential; enlarged the original exhibit only slightly and operated in the same location during the second season. Later, they did build a much larger exhibit in another location, and it was far more profitable; but even then, they built the place ‘on the cheap,’ called it ‘rustic’ when in fact it was simply ‘junky.’

You learn a great deal about people from the operation of an animal exhibit; one thing that you quickly learn is that a Texan driving a Ford will never buy a ticket in order to get into such an exhibit. Instead, they drive up in front of the place very cautiously, as if they were casing a bank for a planned robbery, then remain seated in their car for quite a while in order to see if they can figure out a way to sneak in without buying a ticket. Finally, they get out of the car and come into the entrance building, then again try to figure out how to sneak in; failing that, they will approach the cash register and ask you what it costs for a ticket. Then, regardless of the price of a ticket, they say something like . . . “Oh, my goodness, I don’t want to buy the place, I just want to look around.” Which comment is almost always accompanied with a smirk and a poke of their elbow into their wife’s ribs in order to make sure that she appreciates their humor.

Exceptions? Only one that I ever saw, and I created that exception myself. Bo and I had just walked out of the entrance building of the later, larger exhibit that the Millers had constructed, were walking towards my car when a Ford with Texas plates pulled into the parking lot. So I turned to Bo and said . . . “Ten will get you twenty that they buy tickets and go in.”

Whereupon Bo, who clearly understood Texans driving Fords, looked at me like I was an utter fool, held out his hand and said . . . “Done.”

So then I said, loud enough to make sure that the Texans could hear me . . . “God damned, how do they get away with it? I have never seen anything so spectacular before in my life; a man wrestling a big crocodile in a pool full of sharks.”

“...And God Laughs”

The Arthur Jones Collection

At which point the Texans broke into a dead run for the ticket counter, since they assumed that we were two other tourists who had just seen the show inside.

Bo, looked at me for a minute, pulled a ten dollar bill out of his pocket and handed it to me, and said . . . "You dirty, rotten son of a bitch."

Would also like to point out that I have never agreed with the idea that 'all assholes are Texans' but have found that 'most Texans are assholes.'

Because of my association with Bo I later came into contact with two of the most dangerous men who ever lived, Emmitt Buffkin and Curly McGrothery, both of whom killed so many people during their lifetimes that they probably established new world's records in that regard. During one of Buffkin's numerous trials for murder, all of which trials produced verdicts of 'not guilty,' the judge told them, while charging the jury . . . "This man has killed about half of the people in this county; and then he hasn't killed he stabbed." The trial resulted from the fact that Buffkin shot a man twelve times, through the windshield of his car, in broad daylight, on the main street of Dallas, in front of hundreds of witnesses. But the verdict, as always, was 'not guilty.'

This shooting resulted from the fact that Buffkin served as 'stake holder' in connection with a bet between two other men about the speed of their cars; he clearly told both men before the race that was conducted to settle the bet that he would give the titles to both cars to whoever crossed the finish line first, and that there would be no excuses that would be acceptable. To which terms both men agreed.

But, after the race, the loser told Buffkin . . . "Don't be on Commerce Street tomorrow." Which was a fatal mistake on his part, because Buffkin was on Commerce Street the next day,

McGrothery, following one of his trials during which he was convicted of murder, while being hauled to the so-called 'Pea Farm,' the Arkansas State Penitentiary, was permitted to stop along the way and use a phone for several hours; he called every Sheriff in the state and told them . . . "This is Curly, and I am on the way to the Pea Farm; what are you going to do about it?"

Upon his arrival at the Pea Farm, he was segregated from the other prisoners and put into a private room in the hospital; then, a few days later, quietly released. Curly knew where the bodies were buried, and the Sheriffs knew that he knew.

I was almost forced to kill Curly a few years later, when he pulled a gun on me; I could have killed him, and would have if it had been necessary, and almost did as I was already pulling the trigger on my pistol when he dropped his pistol down inside the front of his pants. He was drunk at the time and fumbled as he tried to draw his gun. He was mean as Hell, but he was not a complete fool, and even drunk he realized his position when he found himself looking down my gun barrel.

If I had killed him then, necessary or not, there would have been no trial; it was a clear case of self defense since Curly had been making threats against my life and came there with the firm intention of killing me. Another consideration was the fact that Curly did not come alone, a man that came with him was standing almost directly behind me, and I was not sure that I could shoot Curly and then turn quickly enough to shoot the second man as well. So it became a so-called Mexican standoff; Curly had dropped his gun and the second man did not dare shoot me in the back while Curly was looking down my gun barrel. So they left, and I never saw either of them again; for awhile I assumed that they would come back, and that if they did I would be forced to kill them both, but they never returned.

But, just in case, I made careful preparations; which, fortunately, were never required.

Many people have made remarks such as . . . "Oh, things like that have never happened to me. You must create these situations."

Sure. Well, none of these people have ever done many, if any, of the things that I have done, or even been in many of the places that I have been. Given anything close to my experiences, they would have found themselves in such situations, and probably would not have survived them.

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As they say . . . “It is better to be judged by twelve men than to be carried by six.”

But, you might be tempted to ask, why did Curly want to kill me? Surely he must have had a reason.

He did have a reason, he was crazy. Do not make the common mistake of trying to explain insanity; if you could explain it then it would not be insanity. Instead, recognize it for just what it is, and treat it accordingly.

In 1952 I visited another animal dealer, Reo Mowrer, in Springfield, Missouri, and just before I left to return to Louisiana he asked me to stop by Curly’s home in a small town in Arkansas and try to collect payment for a big python that Reo had sold to Curly but had never been paid for. At the time I did not know Curly from Adam’s off ox, had never before heard of him; so I did stop by his house, and when somebody answered the door I asked if Curly was home. When told that Curly was not home, I handed the man who answered the door one of my business cards but did not say anything in regard to why I wanted to see Curly; it was a very brief, very polite conversation.

But, later, I started hearing stories to the effect that I had insulted Curly’s relatives and that he intended to kill me. Then, a few months later, C. C. McClung called to tell me that Curly was at his place wanting to buy a big alligator, which he did not have for sale, and wanting to know if I had a big ‘gator that I was willing to sell. He also told me that he was aware that there was bad blood between Curly and me, but added that he believed that nothing would happen if Curly visited my place.

So, a couple of hours later, Curly and McClung arrived together, and while Curly did not act in a truly normal manner, there was no trouble, and I did sell him a big ‘gator for \$1,200.00 in cash, which he paid on the spot; but he did not take the ‘gator away with him, instead left it with me and told me that he would pick it up a couple of months later. Whereupon I told him that I would keep it as long as necessary but would not be responsible for anything that occurred afterwards; in effect, if the ‘gator died before he returned to pick it up it would be his loss, not mine.

So they left, but then Curly did not come back to pick up the ‘gator for several years, and several years after he paid me for it the ‘gator died. When Curly heard about that, he decided to kill me. According to him, I had cheated him.

When McClung called me about Curly I told him that if Curly bought one of my big ‘gators for \$1,500.00 I would give McClung a commission of twenty percent of the sale, \$250.00. But Curly would not pay more than \$1,200.00, and I needed the money so wanted to make the sale, but under the circumstances could not discuss the matter with McClung in front of Curly. So McClung left under the impression that his commission would, at best, be reduced, or at worst not be paid at all. But that is not the way I do business, so the following day I mailed McClung a postal money order for \$250.00, leaving me with a net of only \$950.00. It was not McClung’s fault that I agreed to accept a lower price for the ‘gator, so I felt that he deserved the full commission that he expected.

Reo Mowrer, the man who asked me to see Curly on my way through Arkansas, was probably as crazy as Curly was, but was not dangerous in any sense of the word; would have been the perfect role model for Casper Milktoast.

For a period of several years, Reo operated his animal business out of his house, a small wooden house in the middle of a quiet residential district a few blocks from the center of Springfield, Missouri, selling everything from mice to elephants but specializing in poisonous snakes. Continued operations from there until 1953, when about a hundred Indian cobras and several large iguana lizards escaped and started showing up all over town; which did not serve to please his neighbors all that much, thank you.

He first learned what had occurred when the woman who lived next door to him called and said . . . “Mr. Mowrer, there’s a monster on my front porch, and I don’t appreciate it.” When she went to her front door she found a six-foot-long iguana lizard hanging on the screen door; and, to her, that was a monster, indeed.

Nobody was killed or injured, but they ran him out of town anyway.

“...And God Laughs”

The Arthur Jones Collection

Reo was not very smart, either; during my visit in 1952 I told him a joke about a drunk and an elephant, and when I reached the punch line he laughed. Then during the next couple of days he insisted that I repeat the joke for other people, which I did at least a dozen times; and he always laughed. But, later, when we were watching a movie in a local theater, he suddenly starting laughing, literally became hysterical and was forced to leave the theater; after thinking about it for several days he suddenly understood the joke, halfway through the movie.

The joke? Well, it seems that the local town drunk, a man who had never seen nor heard of an elephant, called the chief of police one night and told him that a monster was raiding his garden. But the chief assumed he was drunk again and told him to go to bed. In fact, an elephant had escaped from a circus and was eating cabbages from the drunk's garden, reaching over the fence with his trunk, pulling out the cabbages and shoving them in his mouth. So the drunk insisted, told the chief that he had to come immediately. Whereupon the chief asked him to describe the monster; and the drunk told him that it was at least ten feet tall and had a long, thick tail. So then the chief asked him what the monster was doing; and the drunk said that the monster was reaching over the fence with his tail and pulling out the cabbages. So the chief said . . . "Then what is he doing with the cabbages?" And the drunk said . . . "No, chief, if I tell you what he's doing with them then you really will believe I'm drunk."