

# And God Laughs...

## The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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# 31

**“Does the left hand ever know what the right hand is doing?”**

**Anon.**

In those days every city, town and village in Mexico had road blocks on every road leading into or out of the place, these being manned by armed police; cars usually were not stopped, but you had to stop in a truck, and that always created a problem because we were driving a truck with Florida plates, had only tourist visas which looked a bit odd for people driving a large truck full of animals and reptiles. The result being that you had to bribe your way into and out of every place you passed through; which required more in the way of time than it did of money, since the Mexican police were paid very little. But it was an almost constant source of irritation. What we were doing, of course, was highly illegal, but that bothered me not at all since I seldom did anything legal. Figured I could talk myself out of any problems that I encountered, and usually could; and knew I could shoot my way out if I ran into a worst case situation.

But, in fact, at the time, a ‘Gringo’ was seldom bothered by anybody in Mexico, because almost everybody in Mexico was shit scared of Americans, probably assumed that the marines would arrive on the spot within about ten minutes after somebody bothered an American, and would then rape all of the women and cut the balls off of all of the men. “Oh, but Daddy, don’t just stand there, can’t you see what he’s doing? He’s raping my little sister.”

“I know, my son, but he’s a Gringo, so go over and hold his balls up out of the sand so that he doesn’t get pissed off.”

Today, in Mexico, the situation is totally different, they look for Gringos to fuck up. In those days most Mexicans respected and liked Americans, primarily because they were afraid of them; but now everybody in Mexico is clearly aware of the fact that the American government will do absolutely nothing regardless of what they do to Americans; so they have lost both their fear and respect. You would not survive five minutes in Mexico today if you tried to do any of the many things that I routinely did then. Since it was all but impossible to totally conceal my pistol I am sure that almost all of the policemen that I encountered knew that I was armed, but none of them ever mentioned it. But a few would object to certain models of pistols; the 1911 model semi-automatic .45 caliber pistol was looked upon as a badge of office by almost all Mexican officials, and they did not like for you to carry such a gun. Every official in Mexico carried such a pistol, in plain sight with the hammer cocked. Many policemen and all soldiers also carried rifles, but I saw very few machineguns in Mexico then. I usually carried both a pistol and a rifle.

I became very good friends with many Mexican officials and the Governor of the state of Yucatan later proposed to my daughter, Eva. Who did not marry him.

The presidents of Mexico can serve only one term of six years, but every president during the last fifty years or so left office a billionaire, having stolen everything he could get his hands on. One fairly recent president of Mexico left office with more than six billion dollars, stole an average of a billion dollars a year while in office, a daily average of about three million dollars. They seldom know how to run the country but they sure know how to steal. And managed to steal that much in spite of the fact that Mexico is a relatively poor country. Our presidents have seldom been able to steal that much, although Lyndon Baines Johnson came pretty close.

On the first trip in the truck brought to the border by Johnny Stephens we picked up a load from Colima first and then started towards the compound in Veracruz; but I did not want to haul a big load of reptiles over the rough trail into the compound in the state of Veracruz so left them with called Pedro the Dog.

He lived, together with a daughter of about thirty and a son of about twenty-five, in a very small house that had been built by the government. The house had only two relatively small rooms and faced out onto a large open area that was surrounded by such houses. There was no plumbing or running water in any of these houses; but in the open area

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there was a large concrete table with running water, a table that the residents used for washing clothes, babies, themselves and anything else they needed to wash, and a table that provided them with water for drinking and cooking.

So we unloaded all of our boxes of reptiles and put them inside Pedro's house, which required moving all of his furniture out into the open area in order to make room for the boxes; which meant that Pedro and his daughter had to work almost continuously around the clock, night and day, moving boxes and his furniture back and forth. The boxes of snakes could not be left out in the open under the bright sun, so had to be in the shade of the house during all daylight hours; but at night they had to move the boxes out in the open in order to have enough room to sleep in the house. But, in fact, I doubt if either of them actually got much sleep while we were gone, spent most of their time moving boxes and furniture. I think Pedro lost about twenty pounds while we were away, and he was not a very large man to start with.

I did not trust him so told him very clearly that I would kill him if even one of my snakes was missing when I returned; and assured him that I knew exactly how many snakes were in each of those boxes, which of course I did not know. We also had about a hundred large iguanas with us, but Pedro did not have enough room for them in the house so we turned them loose inside a large concrete snake pit at a place called the Instituto Tropicales Infirmidades (Institute of Tropical Diseases) which was operated under the direction of a doctor named Nieto, a man who was conducting research with the venom of poisonous snakes, and who bought a lot of poisonous snakes from me since he could not get very many around the city of Veracruz.

Dr. Nieto had become quite friendly and I milked a lot of poisonous snakes for him so that he could use the venom in his research. His institute was located a few miles south of the city of Veracruz near a village called Boca del Rio (mouth of the river) and since he then had no snakes in the big pit there he agreed to let me use it to hold my iguanas while I was gone. Little did he suspect just how that was going to work out. Nor did I. Might have shot myself if I had known.

At the compound in the jungle we loaded more than a hundred spider monkeys and quite a few other wild animals and started in the direction of town; but then disaster struck, the truck broke down and we were stranded in the jungle. It then took us more than a week to repair the truck, and we could find nothing apart from green mangos to feed the monkeys; and all of them immediately came down with the violent shits. The monkey cages were arranged running along both sides of the truck, and were stacked three cages high. The result being that the very liquid shit from the higher cages ran down onto the monkeys in the lower cages, and within about three days all of the monkeys were as bald as an egg, having lost all of their hair as a result of the deluge of shit from above. By which point they did not appear to be very happy. And neither was I, but there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

Then when we finally did get back to Pedro's house we found that the situation there was even worse: it appeared that most of the snakes were dead, terrible smelling liquid was running out of the boxes and the entire housing complex smelled so bad that the residents were on the point of killing Pedro and his daughter. So when we showed up with more than a hundred bald, evil smelling spider monkeys and started trying to give them baths on the table in the middle of the open area the residents really got bent out of shape.

But that was only the beginning: I sent Johnny out to the medical institute to pick up the iguanas, and when he got there he found only a few still alive, and these were swimming around in about a foot of liquid from the iguanas that had died, liquid consisting of bones floating around in a soup of rotten smelling fluid that would have driven a sane man up the wall. He should have taken one look and instantly departed; but, instead, he fished out the few remaining survivors and brought them back to Pedro's house. In the meantime Pedro and his son and daughter were still trying to bathe the spider monkeys while I was trying to locate all of the dead snakes in the boxes and then piled them up in the open area as I found them.

The entire neighborhood was then in an uproar, and when we finally left we were provided with some very plain advice regarding any later trips that we might be planning. I believe that the only reason that they didn't kill us was because they were so desperate for us to take our utterly rotten-smelling wildlife and get to Hell out of there. They ran Pedro off and I never saw him again.

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When we finally got back to southern Texas, after a trip that was nothing short of a nightmare, and stopped at the house of one of my snake hunters, a man named Manuel Gonzalez, things got even worse. One of the spider monkeys escaped and ran up into a large tree immediately behind the house, the only large tree within about thirty miles of the place, a tree that Manuel's wife had been using for shade while washing and cooking for a period of more than forty years.

By that point Johnny and I were both so tired that we were literally drunk with exhaustion, had not slept for several days, and could barely stand up; so I asked the old woman if it would be alright to cut the limb that the monkey was sitting on off of the tree, and she dared not object to this request because I was the sole source of income for her family, if I did not continue to buy the snakes that her husband caught they might starve.

And, of course, one thing led to another, when we cut off the limb the monkey simply jumped to another limb, and when the second limb was cut off he jumped to a third, and so on; in the end we cut the whole damned tree down, at which point the monkey ran off across the field and we were too exhausted to even chase him. In perfect condition that monkey was worth \$15.00, but in his condition at that time he wasn't worth a cent; yet we cut down a tree that the old woman probably would not have taken \$10,000.00 for in our unsuccessful attempt to catch a worthless monkey. At that point we were both obviously insane, literally did not know what we were doing.

Forty-odd years later I still believe that cutting down that old woman's tree was by far the worst thing that I ever did to anybody; later I tried to make up for it by paying for the college education of one of her sons, but I was never afterwards able to be around her without feeling very ashamed of what I had done. But neither she nor her husband ever said a word about it.

We eventually got back to Tarpon Springs and Johnny immediately went into a hospital where he had to stay for about six weeks, and was not fully recovered even then. Finding somebody else to make another trip to Mexico with me was far from easy, because Johnny's stories quickly spread all over town. But we made at least a reasonable profit from that trip in spite of all the disasters.

I finally was able to find an eighteen-year-old boy who agreed to go back to Mexico with me, and the next trip turned out much better. Everything I could get out of Mexico still continued to sell like hot cakes and we were also buying quite a lot from Ralph DeMers in Miami and easily sold everything we got from him; the money was rolling in so fast that Mike and Trudy appeared to be in a state of shock. We were selling more every day than Mike and Trudy had managed to sell during the preceding year. Trudy had quit her job in the grocery store and Mike no longer had time to continue with his previous alligator hide smuggling activities. In less than six months more than 80,000 miles had been put on his truck.

I had previously met a very beautiful young woman named Eva Saenz, who worked in a government office in Minatitlan; her grandparents moved to Mexico from Georgia immediately after the Civil War in order to escape the Carpetbaggers who were then looting the south. Most of her relatives were originally from England and one of her relatives who lived in Mexico City, a man named Dent, still spoke English with a strong British accent. Her father was a very tall man, well over six feet, with bright blue eyes; but he had a rather strangely shaped head which caused his friends to call him Zeppelin. He was employed as a railroad executive by Pemex, the Mexican National Petroleum Company.

Eva, the girl I met and married shortly afterwards, could not speak a word of English but my Spanish was pretty good by that point so that caused no problems. I went to the Veracruz compound first on that trip so after we were married we had to visit the Colima compound in order to pick up the rest of our load there. Eva's aunt, a very wealthy woman who owned a large part of a nearby town, Puerto Mexico, went with us in my truck as far as the city of Pueblo; but that caused problems because it was then illegal for a woman to ride in the cab of a truck in Mexico, and for a good distance I had two women in the cab with me. So the cost of all the bribes required to get through any settlement that we encountered went up considerably in order to get the police to ignore the two women in the cab.

At the request of the American Consul I also took a young American man who was stranded penniless in Veracruz; intended to take him as far as the Texas border, but he had to ride in the back of the truck along with my codriver from Florida.

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But passing through Mexico City at night, and even with two men riding in the back of the truck, somebody managed to steal all of our luggage out of the back of the truck; then, about three-hundred miles past Mexico City, when we first noticed the luggage was missing, the young American insisted upon returning to Mexico City in an effort to find his luggage, believed that the police could help him locate it. So the last I saw of him was when he started off on foot intending to walk back to Mexico City.

Quite a few things were stolen out of the cab of our truck in Mexico City on an earlier trip, and I was getting a bit tired of it; the method that was being used appeared to be obvious, one man would climb into the back of a moving truck from the front of a car that followed the truck very closely, and would throw the luggage out and then climb down onto the car.

So I planned to hide in the back of the truck, under a large tarpaulin, with a machete and a semi-automatic shotgun and with a suitcase sticking out from under the canvas in plain sight; then when the suitcase started to move I planned to grab the guy by his hair, chop his head off with the machete, then stand up and shoot the people in the car through the windshield with the shotgun. But I never got a chance to put that plan into a practical application. Although, as we were passing through the middle of Monterrey, on the trip north with Johnny Stephens, I could see a reflection of the truck in a large plate glass window of a store, and saw two men up on top of the truck busily engaged in throwing boxes of snakes off onto the street. So I told Johnny that I was going to stop suddenly and that we should jump out and grab them; Johnny tried to grab one guy but did not succeed in doing so, but I did catch the other one, but then did not really know what to do with him, so just broke both his arms, got back in the truck and drove away. Whoever opened any of the boxes that they stole was probably very surprised by what they discovered in the boxes.

My new wife, Eva, lost all of her clothes apart from what she was wearing at the time, all of her jewelry including some very valuable antique jewelry that had been given to her by her wealthy aunt, and almost all of her papers, birth certificate, passport, driver's license and everything else in the way of identification. The only paper that was not lost was our marriage certificate, which she had in her purse.

When we went over the volcano into, and later out of, Colima, Eva was terrified, was hysterical from fear; most of the trail over that big mountain was only about seven feet wide, and my truck was eight feet wide, and the drop off from the edge of the trail was sometimes as much as 10,000 feet, about two miles almost straight down. So I was forced to drive with one side of the truck only an inch or so away from a rock cliff on one side of the trail and with one of my rear wheels sticking out into the air past the other edge of the trail. And some of the curves were so sharp that you could not go around them in one continuous move, had to go back and forth several times to get around the curve. And almost all of the trail was so steep that it was all but impossible to drive a truck up it. It was probably the worst road in the world, and the most dangerous. Jesus Garcia, one of the snake dealers in Colima, went over that trail with me one time and asked me why I was driving like a lunatic; but you had to drive in that fashion to even move on that road.

I later took an almost brand new Oldsmobile car over that trail, and utterly destroyed it; afterwards, I made a deal with a car dealer in Laredo, Texas, to trade it in on a new Cadillac, and made the deal over the phone. The dealer later told me he had to sell the Oldsmobile for only \$75.00, as junk, and also told me that he did not intend to make any more deals on the phone.

When I married Eva I was foolish enough to believe that she could easily enter this country as my wife; but when we reached the border at Brownsville the immigration officials insulted both her and me, took her back to the Mexican side of the border and left her in Matamoros.

But since I had a live load that could not be delayed much without producing another disaster, I could not wait around and try to get the situation straightened out the next day; so I hired a Mexican man to smuggle her over the border by pretending that she was his daughter.

The immigration officials maintained road blocks well north of the border in an attempt to apprehend illegal immigrants, and we were stopped at one of these check points; the guy on duty looked at Eva and asked her where she was born, a question she could not understand, but I had told her that she should say only one word if questioned . . . "Laredo." Which sounds the same in either English or Spanish. So she said that and the immigration guy let us pass on.

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I did not get her immigration status straightened out until eleven years later; was never worried about it after our children were born because I knew it would be hard for the government to force her to leave the country with children living here. Eva was never bothered by anybody from the government, but the immigration people from New Orleans did arrest Graham Hall briefly because the American Consul in Salisbury issued him the wrong kind of visa. Also questioned him about all of the empty pistol shells that they saw on the ground behind my office, where I had a shooting range that most of the cops in the state used regularly.

Eva was my third wife, and we lived together for more than twelve years. I have now been married five times, over a period of fifty-one years. Did not kick my wives out quickly as Robin Leach accused me of doing; still remain on very good terms with most of them, and made two of them very wealthy. Quite a long list of people have become wealthy as a result of their association with me, but very few of them ever showed much in the way of appreciation in return.

The animal business is largely seasonal, and after I returned to Tarpon Springs at the end of that first season I got another lesson on the subject of appreciation; Mike and Trudy informed me with perfectly straight faces that we had lost money, which was an obvious lie. In the meantime they had invested a lot of money enlarging and improving the zoo, had both bought new cars, had built an addition to Trudy's house, and showed many other signs of an enormous improvement in their financial position. Were stone broke at the start of that first season and were obviously quite rich by the end of it. So I never got a cent in return for all of my hard work that year, did not even get my original investment of \$750.00 back.

But in fact the actual situation was even worse; because I had been paying all of my living expenses out of my own pocket; we had agreed on that point in advance, at my insistence, because I did not want Mike or anybody else to live like a king and charge it to the company. So my actual losses ran to quite a lot of money apart from the initial small investment.

The only thing I got in the way of a return was the truck, and it was almost worthless as a consequence of the very rough trips to Mexico; so I had to use it as a downpayment on a new truck.

I had carried a typewriter with me throughout that season and wrote long letters to Mike and Trudy almost every day, teaching them everything that they needed to know in order to operate the business successfully; and I got only one letter in return. Mike wrote telling me that he did not believe that the compensation of two cents per mile for use of his truck was enough, suggested that it be increased to four cents a mile, and asked for my agreement to that suggestion.

I wrote back telling him that rather than being too little, compensation at the rate of two cents a mile was actually too high; also told him that I would never have raised that point, but that since he had done so we should determine just how much he should have gotten and modify the agreement accordingly.

But upon my return to Florida Mike tried to tell me that I had agreed to his suggestion in a letter from Mexico; but then could not produce any such letter, because it did not exist. The only letter missing from the file was my response wherein I refused to agree to his suggestion.

But, nevertheless, he had paid himself retroactively at a rate of four cents a mile, for 80,000 miles that had been put on the truck that season; which meant that he had paid himself \$3,200.00 for the use of a truck that only cost him \$1,400.00 when it was new, and he still had the truck.

In addition to the mileage allowance we paid for all fuel, new tires and any required repairs to the truck; all of which was a company expense according to our initial agreement.

But before any of that came to light Mike wanted to use the big truck for a trip to New York; he had met some guy who claimed that he had a big shipment of monkeys and snakes that was about to reach New York by ship, and told Mike that he would sell us the snakes very cheaply if we would haul all of the other animals to Florida in the truck.

But when we reached New York we learned that there were no snakes in the shipment, just hundreds of Asiatic monkeys and other Indian animals, including a large Himalayan bear. We tried to haul the bear to Florida in a shipping crate designed for an adult gorilla, a strong crate made out of very thick wood and with a door like they use on a jail

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cell; but the bear had utterly destroyed the crate and was in the act of escaping before we even got out of town. Was about halfway out the top of the crate while we were crossing the river in the Holland tunnel that joins New York to New Jersey. Such bears have enormous claws on their front feet and are very powerful, and very dangerous. I fought that damned bear halfway across the state of New Jersey, and finally was successful at keeping him inside the crate only by turning it into a replica of a so-called Iron Maiden, a torture device that had sharp spikes all over the inside of it. I bought a bunch of very large nails and drove them through the top and sides of the crate in such a fashion that the bear could not then get to the wood to destroy it. He had to stay in the middle of the crate to keep away from the nails; and we had no more trouble with him after that.

A customer of mine, a man named Brad Bradford who operated a snake show with a carnival, had called before we left Florida for the trip to New York and asked me to stop on the way back south and visit him in Savannah, Georgia. So we did, but when we got there it was raining and very cold; so he suggested that we put all of the monkeys inside his house trailer in order to protect them from the cold. And when I told him that the monkey crates were too large to go through the door of the trailer, he said we should just turn the monkeys loose in the trailer. He was drunk at the time and obviously did not realize just what he was suggesting. The monkeys were very large with teeth that would put a lion to shame, and they would have destroyed the trailer within a matter of minutes, and then would have escaped. But if I had then known what I know now I would have turned the monkeys loose in his trailer.

Like most of the people I have ever known, Brad Bradford was crazy; some years later he decided to get rich by selling preserved dead animals, his hottest item being, he thought, a necklace made with the penis of a monkey, and eventually he had thousands of those, none of which he was ever able to sell. There were several animal dealers in Miami at the time and about half of the animals that they imported died before they could sell them, and these dead animals were simply discarded along with any other trash. So Bradford went around to each animal dealer's place daily for about three years, picking up all of the dead animals and taking them home; most of these ended up in bottles filled with formaldehyde, and eventually he had tens of thousands of such bottles because he was never able to sell any of the preserved animals.

After the house was filled almost to the ceiling he had to find someplace else to store all of the bottles, so then he started digging tunnels under his house and lawn, even under the street in front of his house; he pretended to be digging a swimming pool in his back yard, in order to explain to his neighbors where all of the dirt excavated from the tunnels was coming from.

And he got away with it, for a while; until the street collapsed down into the tunnel that he had dug underneath it. Then the authorities discovered that he had undermined the entire neighborhood.

Back around 1920 some guy up north, in Cleveland I believe, managed to come into possession of about fifty insane, adult elephants; he got these from circuses and carnivals that did not want to keep them any longer because they had gone insane and started killing people. So every time he heard about such an elephant he would go and get it, haul it back to the city where he was living and put it with the other elephants that he already had. He was keeping all of these insane elephants in the basement of a large building right in the middle of town. Louis Goebel visited the place and told me that it was like a visit to Hell; the place was lighted only with torches, the elephants were chained by their legs to the concrete posts that supported the building, elephant shit was about three feet thick all over the place, and the elephants were constantly screaming, rattling their chains and trying to grab somebody with their trunks. It was, he said, damned near impossible to walk through the place without getting killed.

A man named Adolph Dammerow did something very similar in New Orleans much more recently, he picked up sick or insane wild animals of almost any kind that he could locate and took them to his house in a residential area of the city. He started collecting these animals in the early 1950s and by 1961 had so many animals crammed into his house that there was barely enough room between their cages to permit you to pass between them, and it was sometimes dangerous to try to do that. He had several large adult Chimpanzees, some of which were larger than most big men and about ten times as strong as any man, and dangerous as Hell. One of these that he named Whiskers weighed 230 pounds and had balls the size of a large apple; most people who saw him believed that he was a gorilla because of his size.

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But all of this came to a screeching halt when an adult African lion that he was keeping in a cage sitting outside his house badly mauled a local child; whereupon Adolph asked me to keep the lion for him until he could figure out what to do with it, and I was stupid enough to agree to do so. Then about three days later the lion mauled one of the young men working for me. Figuring that two maulings were enough, thank you, I shot the lion and told Adolph to come haul its carcass and the cage away.

In the 1940s I once had several rattlesnakes, a gila monster, an octopus and a tame African lion named Donna in my room in a large hotel on the main street of Long Beach, California. That room was never the same again. If you would go into a nice hotel room and chop up all of the furniture with an ax, and then run the pieces through a meat grinder, and then mix a few hundred pounds of lion shit and a lot of bone scraps with the remains of the furniture and then scatter this around on the floor, you would have something close to what that room looked like when I left. To that you would have to add most of the material from which the walls of the room were constructed; at one point it appeared that the lion might break clear through the wall into the next room. About the only thing that was not utterly destroyed was the ceiling of the room, but even that was rather badly damaged.

Initially I was keeping the lion in the bathroom, because I assumed that she could not do much damage to that; but upon returning to the room one day I found that she had escaped from the bathroom by biting and clawing her way through the door, and by the time I realized that she was loose in the room it was already much too late. At that point I believed that the worst thing possible had already happened, but as usual I was wrong and things steadily got worse. She was not a mean lion, was perfectly tame and loved me, but she also loved to chew up anything she could. I took a girl up to the room one night, having reassured her that the lion was harmless, and the lion ate her shoes while we were screwing; and it is damned difficult to buy women's shoes at three O'clock on a Sunday morning, even in California. But I could not take her home to her brother's house barefoot; so I 'borrowed' a pair of shoes that some woman had put out in the hall in order to get them shined. The girl wore those shoes home and then threw them out of the window of her room to me and I put them back where I found them.

Everybody then working in the hotel except the manager knew about the lion, and they all thought it was funny; but, then, none of them had seen what the interior of that room looked like. The maids, of course, were never permitted to enter my room.

In 1950 I had 1,800 rattlesnakes in my hotel room in the middle of Oklahoma City, and everything was fine until the female snakes started giving birth to live babies that easily escaped from the boxes through the air holes and then got out of my room by crawling through the crack at the bottom of the door. Later I caught some of them in every room on that floor of the hotel, but could never be certain that I had caught them all because I had no way of knowing how many there were. Strangely enough, none of the other residents of the hotel were in the least disturbed by it, seemed to think it was funny. Although, a bit later, when somebody found out that I had a cobra in my room they called the cops, and that caused a bit of a flap, and got me some ink in the local press.

About forty years ago we left several sacks of live rattlesnakes in our motel room in south Texas while we went into Mexico for a few hours, and did not notice that some had escaped when we returned; still did not miss them until we got back to Louisiana. So on later trips we avoided that motel; but eventually I had to stay there again because all of the other local motels were full. The owner did not recognize me, but the first thing he told me was about the time that some crazy bastards left a bunch of rattlesnakes in one of his rooms. In those days, of course, we never used our real names when staying in a hotel or motel, just in case.

My daughter Eva, when she was twelve, had a tame South American jaguar that slept with her, bathed with her and sometimes went along on trips with us in both cars and airplanes; we were staying in a motel in Laredo, Texas, and Eva had the jaguar in her room. She called down to the restaurant and told a waitress to send two whole, raw chickens up to her room. And the maid said . . . "Yes, Miss Jones, and what would you like to drink with them?"