

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“Do I think I’m better than you? Listen, by comparison to you, I come across like ‘I, God, Your Heavenly Father, world’s greatest hero and all around genius.’ And that’s giving you the benefit of the doubt; which you don’t deserve.”

Anon.

Very little is known about diseases of reptiles, and in 1957 almost nothing was known on the subject; some people then believed that reptiles suffered from no diseases, a belief I did not share. So, when I sold several big crocodiles to the California Alligator Farm, I advised the owner, Frank Earnest, to isolate the crocodiles from his alligators . . . just in case.

He should have listened; and it appeared that he had, because he constructed pens for the crocodiles that shared nothing with his alligators and I initially believed that the chance of any unsuspected disease spreading from the crocodiles to the alligators was unlikely. But it happened anyway, and with almost no warning his alligators started to die in large numbers; and, given the circumstances, I suspected that the crocodiles were carriers of some unknown disease that they were immune to, but that was almost invariably fatal for alligators, who apparently had no such immunity.

His stock of alligators, hundreds of them, had been shipped to Los Angeles from Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1906, and thus had been there fifty-one years, with very little mortality; so a large number of sudden deaths was alarming, and if his alligators continued to die in such numbers it might put him out of business.

So he called me on the phone, and we discussed the situation at great length; and I told him what I suspected, and while I did not feel guilty about what had happened, did not believe it was my fault, I nevertheless did feel that I had some sort of responsibility in the matter.

He asked me if I would be willing to go back to Africa, at his expense, in order to capture more large crocodiles; so that, if all of his alligators died, he could turn his business into a crocodile farm. But I told him that doing so would at best be very expensive, and at worst might not even be possible. Then I suggested another possible solution to his problem: told him that caimans could be captured in South America in their millions, and that a trip to South America for caimans would be much less expensive than a return trip to Africa for more crocodiles. And added that while caimans are smaller than crocodiles he could make up for the reduction in size by an increase in numbers.

In a very real sense Frank Earnest had been responsible for my start in the film industry: when I shot my first film, in the Caprivi strip, I did not believe that it had any commercial value, and that might have been true except for Frank. When he saw it he told me that he believed he could sell it for me in Hollywood, for use on television; and he did, arranged a sale to Jack Douglas, who was then producing a series called Bold Journey.

That first film was used on national television, on the then new ABC Network, in the fall of 1957, as one episode of a series being sponsored by the Ralston Purina Company. And they liked it so much that they wanted more films produced by me, films that I did not have; which demand for more of my films was largely responsible for my trip up the Congo river, and another film was produced on that trip and was then sold for use on the same series. The second film being largely devoted to gorillas and chimpanzees.

By today’s standards I was paid almost nothing for these first two films, but did get enough to cover all of my costs with a bit of profit left over; and, of greater importance to me at the time, I got an enormous amount of free national publicity for my business. Almost overnight my mail jumped from a few letters a week to hundreds of letters a day, then to thousands a day.

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Having already sold my first two films to the network, almost by accident, I was beginning to see the possibilities; then believed that I could produce at least a dozen such films in South America because of the great variety of wildlife found there. Besides, I already spoke Spanish and had a lot of experience in other parts of Latin America, primarily in Mexico but also in Nicaragua and British Honduras.

Secondly, a trip to South America would not only provide filming opportunities but would enable me to obtain large numbers of animals for export to this country; animals that I knew I could sell at a profit. So Frank and I reached an agreement: I would go to South America, sharing the initial expenses with him, and taking his then nineteen-year-old son, Kenny, with me, and we would get him as many animals for his farm as he wanted; literally any number of caimans, thousands if he wanted that many.

And he did; we later shipped them to him by the thousands, together with smaller numbers of South American crocodiles and many other types of tropical reptiles, boa constrictors, tegu and iguana lizards and even some monkeys. As things turned out, all of his alligators did not die, but most of them did, and many that did not die were badly crippled by the disease. So the animals we shipped him from South America saved his business.

Having had some, but very little, previous experience in South America, I also took Ralph Demers with me on the first trip; which proved to be a major mistake on my part, because Ralph, as usual, was flat on his ass, and rather than trying to help me did everything he could think of to steal from me. It was his plan for me to ship all of the animals that I got to him in Miami; and then, he said, he would sell them and send me my share of the resulting income. Sure. But I wasn't quite that stupid, knew exactly how that would work out; my share would have come to sweet fuck all, zilch, nada.

So, after wasting a lot of my time and money, when Ralph finally realized that his scheme was not going to work out, he left and returned to Miami; whereupon things started working much better, since I quickly learned that I could get along very nicely without his advice, thank you. Ralph's plans usually amounted to what I called a 'he gets rich and I lose my ass type of deal.' So I shipped all of the animals that I got to Slidell and had no difficulty selling all of them; although, since I could not be in two places at the same time, in Colombia getting animals and simultaneously in Slidell selling them, I did have a few problems. Whenever I was on one end of the line bad things tended to happen on the other end of the line.

But South America was a lot closer to Slidell than Africa was, so I solved most of the problems by frequent trips back and forth between Baranquilla, Colombia, and Slidell. Because of currency regulations in Colombia at the time, it was possible to buy airline tickets for something less than nothing; such tickets were not only free but they would actually pay you to take them, or would, at least, if you knew what you were doing.

The official rate of exchange for Colombian pesos was two and one-half pesos for one American dollar; but we could get seven and one-half pesos for a dollar on the black market. And since the price for an airline ticket was based on the official exchange rate, an opportunity was created for me to travel for less than nothing.

For example: I could exchange \$100.00 in U. S. currency for \$750.00 in pesos, then could buy an airline ticket to this country for, say, \$250.00 pesos, use half of that ticket for the trip to this country and then cash in the return half of the ticket in Miami or New Orleans for \$50.00 U. S. Thus I paid only \$33.33 for the roundtrip ticket and then later cashed in the unused half of it for \$50.00. So I then had a free ticket plus a profit of \$16.67.

Airfreight for the animals that I shipped to this country was nearly as cheap: for any shipment of animals weighing more than 100 kilos, 220 pounds, the charge was only fifteen cents per pound, but that is assuming that you paid the full price, which was something nobody in Colombia then did.

So we made a deal with the guy who weighed all of our shipments from Colombia, and in exchange for a bribe of a few pesos he would see to it that a shipment never weighed more than 101 kilos, or 222 pounds. And since most of our shipments actually weighed at least ten times that much, this meant that our true cost for freight was about one and a half cents per pound. We always prepaid the airfreight in Colombia, so that there would be no excuse to weigh the shipment when it arrived in this country.

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Similar arrangements were made in order to get around all of the existing export restrictions; on one occasion we shipped a stated number of ten caimans in a total of thirty shipping boxes, and each box contained about fifty caimans. Nobody bothered to ask just how we managed to distribute ten caimans into thirty boxes; for only a few pesos the officials in Colombia forgot how to count.

Later, when I started using my own airplanes for exporting animals from Colombia, the situation was even better: at that time, nobody checked an incoming or departing airplane that was operated by a private individual, you could have imported or exported large herds of elephants and nobody would ever have become aware of it. We just loaded our airplanes and departed; and when we returned we took in tons of U. S. products that found a ready market in Colombia at relatively high prices, and we never paid a cent for either export or import duties. Colombia, at that time, was governed very loosely, if at all; you could do literally any damned thing that you wanted to, and nobody cared.

The laws, of course, were very strict; but nobody attempted to enforce any of the laws; and on the off chance that you might get questioned by some official you could solve that problem for a few pesos.

Fuel for airplanes cost less than nine cents a gallon if paid for in pesos, and only sixteen cents a gallon if paid for in dollars, flight plans in and out of the country were not required, local labor was available for about a dollar a day for a twelve-hour work day, and the people worked hard, and our living expenses were so low that they were almost free. And wild animals of a wide variety were available literally in their millions, at prices so low that getting them free would not have made much difference.

Boa constrictors cost about three cents a pound, and could be purchased by the ton, while selling here for \$2.00 a pound; monkeys could be bought for less than a dollar and sold here for \$15.00 or more, and they were available by the thousands; an adult jaguar cost less than \$10.00 and sold here for at least \$500.00, and while these were not as common as snakes or monkeys we did get a few dozen every year.

It was a gold mine, almost a license to steal; which, of course, attracted thieves in great numbers, so you did have to remain in a state of full alert at all times.

When we first arrived in Colombia, it was our intention to capture the caimans ourselves, as I did the crocodiles in Africa; and for a while we did capture them ourselves. And caimans proved to be by far the easiest type of crocodilian to capture; although I still don't know just why they are so easy to catch, they are either very stupid or very brave, do not understand the danger or assume that they can defend themselves against anything.

Perhaps they are just too brave to be afraid of anything; they certainly act like it, because they will just sit there and look at you with no sign of fear until you actually lay hands on them. But then things quickly change; once you do touch them all Hell breaks loose, and what follows must be experienced to be appreciated. Until you slip a noose around his neck, a caiman will not move; but the next minute or so is an entirely different matter. They will then be in the air over your head, in your lap, under the boat, in the boat, moving so fast that it is almost impossible to follow their movements with your eyes; snapping their jaws and slapping with their tails, while rolling over and over at a blinding speed of movement. Caimans are much smaller than crocodiles, but far more ferocious when touched.

And while relatively small, they can be dangerous as Hell; are not likely to kill you but can deliver terrible wounds. Have a lot of very sharp teeth and powerful jaws, and know how to use them. Thus catching a seven foot caiman provides a much bigger battle than catching a fifteen foot crocodile that weighs at least twenty times as much as the caiman.

By that point my Spanish was quite good, but Kenny Earnest could speak only a few words, and usually misused those: we arrived at a dock one day with a boat full of large caimans, and there were several priests standing there as we landed. One priest then asked Kenny if we were killing the caimans for their skins; and Kenny answered, in his terrible Spanish . . . "No, Father, we are fucking them." One of the words for fuck also means to capture.

At that time we were staying in a house built on an island in the wide mouth of the Atrato river, a river that separates western Colombia from southern Panama, and that is one of the wildest areas in Colombia; the mouth of the river at that point is several miles wide, and is literally alive with large sharks. Nando Canova, the adopted son of my

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agent in Barranquilla, Adalgiso Canova, was helping Kenny and I catch caimans; and he loaned my boat and motor to some priests, without my knowledge or permission, so they could cross the mouth of the river in order to visit the small town of Turbo. Enroute across the river they hit a submerged log floating just beneath the surface of the water and sunk the boat, thus losing both the boat and its motor; the only saving grace in the situation being that all of the priests on board the boat were eaten by sharks, but it still left us without either a boat or a motor.

Which ended our personal attempts to catch caimans; but we quickly learned that we could buy them from local peasants and Indians a lot more cheaply than we could capture them ourselves. And just how many did you want? A thousand? A million? Ten million? We bought them by the hundreds of tons; after the locals learned that we would buy them they came in so fast that we had a hard time building places to hold them fast enough to meet the requirements.

Kenny was about as horny as I was, and before we worked out the system for making connections with local girls that I covered in an earlier chapter, he spent every night in a local whorehouse, the Jardin Azul, or Blue Garden; where they provided a choice from more than a hundred girls employed there. He would usually return to the hotel about dawn, sleep until well into the afternoon, work until after dark and then go back to the whorehouse for most of the night.

Canova had several large cages for monkeys and other animals that had been built in a large area that surrounded his house, an area enclosed inside a high wall; and we added several large concrete pools to hold all of the caimans that were coming in daily. Canova's house was in the middle of a fairly nice residential area of the city, but none of his neighbors objected to the animals in his yard. Building restrictions had then never been heard of in Colombia.

In those days most of the cargo moving between this country and Colombia was southbound, and most of the airplanes that carried cargo were forced to fly back north empty; so in an attempt to get northbound cargo they started offering cargo flights back to this country for only \$300.00; and could carry 12,000 pounds of cargo, so that also provided us with cheap airfreight for our animals. We made several such flights using chartered airplanes belonging to a small airline with its headquarters in Baranquilla. When using these airplanes we could skip the usual stops in Miami and fly directly to New Orleans, which was only thirty-five miles from my compound in Slidell. It was always very hot in that part of Colombia, but sometimes we would encounter cold weather on arrival in Louisiana and that sometimes caused problems because the tropical animals we were hauling could not stand much in the way of cold weather; and since those cargo planes had no heaters in the cargo area we had to be very careful about just how the animals were packed for shipment to this country. I was already very experienced as a pilot of the type of airplanes we were using, C 46s, so usually flew the planes myself while the company pilot slept on the floor of the cockpit. Kenny went along as a passenger on one trip to New Orleans and it turned out to be very cold as we approached New Orleans, and since he was dressed for the tropics he damned near froze to death.

In addition to animals and reptiles we got large numbers of birds, flamingos and toucans primarily; and while I was initially hesitant about dealing in flamingos, since I assumed they would be difficult to keep alive, it turned out that they are very hardy, tough as Hell in spite of their appearance. I have handled several thousand flamingos and never lost a single one.

Although, a few years later, I thought for a while that I had lost an entire airplane load of flamingos from Yucatan. On the trip north from Yucatan with several hundred flamingos on board, on that trip flying a B 25 medium bomber, I ran into a solid wall of heavy thunder storms that I could not get around; then tried to fly above them and climbed to an altitude of 23,000 feet, but found that I was still not above the storms and was forced to fly through them. The plane had no pressurization or heater, so it got very cold and the air pressure dropped to less than half of normal sea level pressure; which was uncomfortable for the crew but later appeared to have been fatal for the flamingos.

When we landed in New Orleans the flamingos looked like they had been inflated with a high pressure air hose; their bodies were swollen to an enormous size. As the air pressure dropped at the high altitude the air inside the flamingos expanded; they looked like a bunch of balloons that had been inflated far beyond a normal size. I really believe that if you had pricked one with a needle it would have exploded. So I figured: well, scratch one load of flamingos. But, in fact, none of them died; within two days they were back down to a normal size and eating like crazy.

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My luck with smaller types of tropical birds was seldom so good; so I did not deal in a wide variety of birds, restricted my exports of birds to flamingos, toucans, king vultures and harpy eagles, all of which proved to be very hardy. Much later I got involved with large numbers of parrot family birds, but that's another story.

In the late spring of 1958, while in Slidell, I came down with a bad case of the flu and was helpless for several weeks, which prevented me from going back to Colombia as quickly as I had intended to; and that resulted in yet another disaster. During the period of several weeks that I was sick in Slidell, I sent Canova several thousand dollars a week, money to be used for buying more animals; then planned to build up enough stock for a very large shipment that would require several airplanes to haul it.

Kenny was still in Colombia and sent me a cable weekly telling me exactly how many animals were in the compound awaiting my return, and by the time I was able to go back there was an enormous load of animals in the compound in Barranquilla. Then Canova made his move: when I got back he claimed that all of the animals in the compound were his, refused to return any of them to me. Which left me with only two choices: either sue him or kill him, and I was certainly tempted to kill him but was not sure that I could get away with it. So I did nothing, apart from a great deal of cursing.

Then, a few days later, while sitting in the lobby of the hotel trying to figure out what to do, a man named Soloman Baraque came up to me, introduced himself, said that he was aware of what Canova had done, and also said that he wanted to enter a partnership with me for the exportation of wild animals. He was a relatively wealthy owner of several stores in Baranquilla and was married to a much younger, very beautiful girl; while a citizen of Colombia, he was an Arab of some sort.

So, within less than a week after Canova pulled his stunt, I was back in the animal business in Barranquilla; and, initially, Soloman was as good as his word. He put up all of the money required to build a new, much larger animal compound constructed in accord with my design, provided all of the money needed to buy animals, and agreed that these would be landed in Slidell at no cost to me. I would then sell them and send him half of the resulting income. So it was a no risk opportunity for me.

For the next few months things went very well indeed; but then the size of the weekly shipments of animals started to drop off, and eventually I learned that Soloman was not sending all of the animals that he bought to me; was, instead, also selling them to several of my competitors. Which was in direct violation of our agreement.

Among other things, Soloman was the worst driver I ever saw; on the highway he drove at about twenty-five miles an hour, but in town he always drove as fast as his car would go. He caused two major accidents during the first two times that I rode with him; then tried to blame the accidents on other drivers. After that I refused to ride with him.

Later, he visited me in Slidell and drove out to Hollywood with me in a new Cadillac that I had just purchased; and became terribly upset when I refused to let him drive my car. So had to content himself with dribbling the juice from several large peaches all over the upholstery of my car. He was also one of the sloppiest people I ever met.

So, in the end, the deal went sour again; but we did manage to get Frank Earnest an enormous number of caimans for his alligator farm, and I did make a lot of money for about a year. And also produced several films that I sold to network television.

Somewhat later, after the final fiasco in Colombia, I established another compound in Iquitos, Peru, and that was very successful for about eighteen months; until Ray Olive and Pete Sargent managed to fuck that situation up too.