

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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“Beauty is as beauty does.”

Anon.

Grace Olive Wiley was not, when I knew her, a beauty; but she was one of the nicest, and one of the most unusual, people I ever knew. I first heard of Grace when I was a child in Oklahoma, when I ran across a rather brief mention of her in a book I found in the school library; she was, when that book was published, a teacher somewhere in the midwest, in Ohio I believe. The subject of the book was snakes. Grace was eventually fired from her teaching job because of her interest in snakes; because she had been keeping poisonous snakes as pets; and they were pets, perfectly tame, and never offered to bite her even though she handled them with her bare hands and with no attempt to restrain them.

By the time I met her, just before the war, she was living in a nice house in a quiet residential area in North Long Beach, California; living there with her mother and with more than one-hundred poisonous snakes of a wide variety, and all of her snakes were perfectly tame. The last time I saw her was in November of 1947, when I went to see her together with a friend of mine named Ben Sorenson; then, about a year later, she was killed as a result of stupidity on the part of a then rather wellknown writer whose name I have now forgotten.

The account of her death, as published in Argosy magazine in 1948 or 1949, had very little to do with what actually happened. A few days before her death, Grace received an Indian cobra that had unusual markings on the back of its hood; when the snake's hood was spread in a threatening posture the distinct markings on the back of the hood formed a perfect latter G, her first initial. So the writer and photographer from Argosy magazine insisted that she handle that particular snake because of its unusual hood markings; insisted in spite of the fact that she told him that the snake was not yet tame and thus was not safe to handle.

The result being that she was bitten by a poisonous snake for the first time during a long life of handling snakes with her bare hands. Then, after she was bitten, the writer panicked and was apparently unable, or unwilling, to do any of the things that she asked him to do in the way of helping her. Later, when I learned the details of what actually happened, and having already read the writer's version of the events, I was strongly tempted to pay him a brief visit for the purpose of kicking his ass up between his shoulder blades; but his travel schedule never quite meshed with mine, so I never got around to doing it.

Among a number of unusual snakes, unusual apart from the fact that they were perfectly tame, Grace had the two largest king cobras that I ever saw; one of these cobras was nearly seventeen feet long and the other one was not much smaller. Grace was carrying the largest of these two enormous cobras across her front lawn one day, supporting it by the middle of its body while several feet of its tail end were dragging along the grass behind her and its head was waving around loose in front of her face, when a small crocodile that was running loose in her yard grabbed the cobra's tail with its mouth.

Since this happened behind her back, Grace was not aware of the fact that the crocodile had bitten the cobra's tail; but the cobra was aware of it because the tail is the most sensitive part of any snake, and was none too happy about what had happened as Grace continued to drag the crocodile across the lawn while it held on to the snake's tail.

Did the cobra bite her? No, but it did try to alert her to what was happening to its tail: it started bumping her in the chest with its nose in an attempt to get her attention . . . “Hey, wake up; get that damned thing loose from my tail.”

My uncle, Arthur Belcher, my mother's brother, was living in Beverly Hills, California, before the Second World War, and I first met Grace while visiting him. He took me with him on a trip to San Diego and I visited the zoo there while he was occupied with business matters; the man in charge of the reptiles in the zoo, a man named Perkins, gave me a large California Red Rattlesnake and I took it back to Beverly Hills to my uncle's apartment. But my uncle's wife, Silvia, was afraid of snakes, so I gave the snake to Grace.

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On my way to give the snake to Grace, riding on a crowded city bus at night and carrying the snake in a thin cotton sack, things got quite interesting for a while. The bus was more than full and I was forced to stand in the aisle while holding on to an overhead hand grip; and everything was fine until the snake started to feel too heavy for me to retain my grip on the top of the sack it was in. In order to make it easier to hang on to the sack I wrapped the end of the sack around my wrist and then grabbed the overhead hand grip with that same hand; the result being that the sack was then hanging directly in front of the face of an old woman who was sitting alongside of where I was standing. But, of course, the old woman did not know what was in the sack and thus was not disturbed.

Not, at least, until the bus stopped and the driver turned on the lights. As luck would have it, one of the lights was on one side of the sack while the woman's face was on the other side; so when the lights came on the woman was instantly aware of just what was in the sack that was hanging only a few inches in front of her face. You might be amazed at some of the language that old women sometimes use, I certainly was.

I managed to get off of the bus alive, if just barely, and got a lot of free advice from several people as I forced my way down the crowded aisle in order to reach the door. Then, assuming that somebody would probably call the police at the first opportunity, I was forced to walk several miles to Grace's house while still carrying the snake in the sack, and while hiding in the bushes along the way every time I saw a car approaching; so the trip to her house took me most of the rest of that night. But she fed me breakfast the following morning and thanked me for the snake; and she still had that snake the last time I saw her, about seven years later. By which time the snake was perfectly tame and would take food out of her hand while being very careful not to bite her.

Before I got to know Grace I had always assumed that poisonous snakes could never be treated as a tame pet, and most people still believe that to be true; but I now know that almost any type of poisonous snake, if properly handled, will rather quickly become perfectly tame. And, secondly, once having become tame they will then never bite you under any circumstances; most tame, formerly wild, animals will bite you if you hurt them or scare them, but snakes are an exception to that general rule. Once having gotten over their initial fear of humans, and thus having lost any tendency to bite in self defense, snakes will never again attempt to bite you. That much, at least, I learned from Grace.

I have also had several perfectly tame alligators and crocodiles who would come up to me and very carefully take a piece of meat out of my hand, who would even permit me to put my hand inside their mouth but would never bite me; and their actions made it perfectly clear that they understood just exactly what they were doing. As mentioned elsewhere, reptiles are a lot more intelligent than most people believe.

What happened to Grace's snakes after she died was nothing short of an outrage: one of the two king cobras was sold to Ross Allen in Silver Springs, Florida, and the other one to the zoo in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Both Ross Allen and Hugh Davis, the director of the Tulsa zoo, were scared to death of these perfectly tame snakes that Grace had been keeping for many years, usually running loose in her house, so they handled them in an entirely different manner and the result was easily predictable: both were dead within a couple of months because of the rough handling they were given.

I never learned what happened to the rest of her snakes, but they were probably treated in a similar manner; and I doubt if any of them were still alive six months after Grace was killed.

Most poisonous snakes, if captured as adults, die very quickly in captivity; die of fear. But snakes that are born in captivity and are then exposed to humans immediately after they are born usually will not ever show any fear of humans; somewhat along the lines of what happens when newly hatched geese are exposed to humans immediately after hatching and then apparently assume that the human is their mother, snakes also tend to accept humans as a harmless part of their environment if exposed to them while very young.