Snake-Men Play with DEATH

By CRAG WARRELL (FACT)

THERE was a saying in the early 1900's that flyers and snake-men had the same endings. Today flying is considered safe.

There are two men in Australia today living on borrowed time. One has began allowing small snakes to bite him with the idea of developing immunity as he works up to tiger-snakes; the other has announced that he will soon be able to handle his pet tiger.

Similar notions were credited to the old snake-men of the show-grounds who lived with their snakes and too often died with them. Many claimed their own secret antidote but in most cases this failed.

The tiger snake was the most persistent killer.

In 1917 a show-man known as That Man Gray opened a snake-show in Pitt Street, Sydney, on the lot adjoining Lowe's store. His two snake-men were Barnett Alberez and George Valves.

The night that Alberez succumbed to a tiger snake bite Fate would have been kinder had That Man Gray been the victim.

On the same spot one month later another tiger snake claimed the life of George Valves.

At the coroner's inquest it was revealed that in view of his partner's fate Valves had drawn the snake's fangs. William Le Soueff, an eminent zoologist, pointed out that despite drawn fangs the venom glands were still intact and could introduce poison into small wounds inflicted with other teeth, the stumps or drawn fangs, or developing new fangs which quickly grow. Guinea-pigs tested in this manner died in between one and three minutes.

That Man Gray later died in an asylum for the insane.

Another ill-fated trio opened at the Manly Carnival shortly afterwards; they were Cleopatra the Lady Snake - Charmer, Tommy Wanliss and Anthony Kimbel.

It was not an asp that kissed this Cleopatra's breast, but a deadlier tiger snake. The tragedy

broke up the partnership. The youthful Wanliss adopted the show name of Young Morrisey and showed snakes on his own account, eventually taking his show to South Africa.

Ironically, young Wanliss, who had survived the bites of so many Australian snakes, finally met his master in Africa—the green mamba. Alby Jackson, a well known showman wrote in his letter to the "Sunday Mail"—"He allowed himself to be bitten on the arm 8 o'clock Saturday night (18/7/21). At 4 o'clock the following morning Tom developed bad symptoms, retching blood. At 10 o'clock he had a look at himself in the mirror and calmly remarked, 'The green mamba wins.' He lingered on till the next day and died a martyr to his business, snake-bite."

Even Fox's death in 1913 did not convince Wanliss. Snake - men never seem to learn. Frank Fox, believing he had discovered a snake bite antidote, sailed to India to sell it to the government. A krait proved the antidote useless.

When C. J. French, curator of Adelaide's old snake park, was bitten by a black tiger snake he believed himself immune and carried out no adequate treatment. His death in the days before an Australian anti-venom serum is considered responsible for later experiments with Australian venoms and consequent development of Anti-venene.

Anti - venene today provides a cross protection, to some degree, against the bites of all Australian snakes.

Although the tiger snake is generally conceded to be the showman's killer, it was a brown snake that killed Garnett See, at La Perouse. A brown snake was also said to have been responsible for the death of Mrs. Bydon while she was showing in North Queensland, but on to-day's evidence it seems more likely to have been a taipan. The fangs of a brown snake are relatively short, whereas the fangs of Mrs. Bydon's killer penetrated thick leather leggings.

Probably the best known of the "snakey" characters was "Professor" Jimmy Morissey, an old self-confessed reprobate with a heart of gold and a thousand humorous anecdotes. He claimed to have been in every lock-up in Australia. Morissey became a familiar showground figure with his large drooping moustache and battered felt hat with a double-cord tourniquet around the band. "That's my trade mark," he would grin.

Morissey's fondness for the hops led him into numerous scrapes including clearing the bars of various pubs with his snakes, a feat since copied by many would-be Morisseys.

It was after one such episode that he emerged from a Melbourne lock-up, He was about to sign for the return of his personal effects when he noticed his bag of snakes was missing. One of Morissey's favourite stories was how his legal representative secured a settlement of sixty pounds, at the rate of ten pounds for each snake, on the grounds that the police had deprived him of his livelihood.

What became of Morissey? Nobody knows.

One snake-man who eventually turned his talents towards the benefit of mankind was Tom Eades, better known as "Pambo." Eades started business in a Melbourne arcade, his skin darkened, and dressed as an Indian. On his return from World War I he resumed show

"Now I'll give you some advice. Keep your eyes on the ball."

work until he secured a job as snake-keeper at Melbourne Zoo.

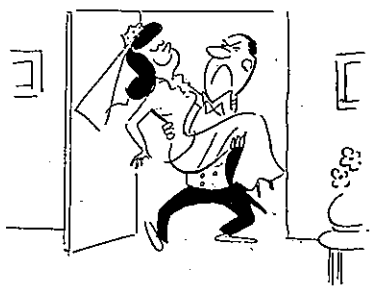
Later he worked at the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories, collecting, tending and milking snakes on behalf of Dr. F. G. Morgan and Dr. C. H. Kelleway.

Today, snake-men still follow the country shows, but most of them handle only harmless snakes but they often advertise them as "deadly reptiles." After Rocky Vane passed on, his second wife, attractive Joyce Vane, continued the Queensland circuits. When Fred Wade, crippled from umpteen snake-bites, "retired" into private business in Hobart, his wife Judea carried on the act on Hobart Regatta days. She still does.

Snake-shows are not as profitable as they were in the days of Morissey. Competition is keen and as many as four snake stands may be operating on the one show ground. Women now predominate in the game, as the wily show-man soon reasoned that Eve draped in green tree snakes would sell more tickets than the dare-devil with a handful of copperheads.

Spruikers hoarsely vie with each other for trade, hurling thinly veiled insults at the opposition. "Come on ladies and gentlemen—see the beautiful exotic snake-dancer wrapped in the coils of a Queensland python"—"Who wants to see mutton dressed as lamb? Step right up and we'll show you a little blonde number from Tenesse dancing in the pit of death."

It seems a pity that in this field showmanship has outweighed the educational aspect as the average Australian is lacking in snake-knowledge and is generally being misled on show-grounds. Most deaths by snake-bite are due to ignorance.



On her release from a Japanese prison camp in the Phillipines, Paula Perry, a young snake-dancer, realizing the unusual value of the truth, took her snake-pit and deadly contents around Australia pointing out methods of identifying snakes and demonstrating first aid in the case of a bite. The treatment is simple; if the bite is anywhere on a limb tie a ligature on a single-boned part (the upper arm or thigh), between the bite and the heart, cut the wound and promote bleeding. Then send for the doctor. If the bite is on the face or trunk where a ligature cannot be applied bleed the wound well and call a doctor. Patent antidotes are out.

When the snake's ugly record is checked it is small wonder that today's showmen prefer harmless snakes. Too many things can go wrong. Two types of people are bad insurance risk, those who handle live snakes and those who try to kill them. You can never be quite sure that a snake is dead—and even dead snakes still have poison.

George Cann, the king of all snake-men is still alive. Now curator of Sydney Taronga Zoo's reptiles he has accumulated a record of about four hundred bites from the thousands of snakes he has captured. Showing first at the age of twelve years, he associated with all the old snake-men, and gathered a greater first-hand knowledge of snakes' habits than any living Australian.

In his earlier show-days he wore shoulder-length hair and allowed snakes to bite him in the time-honoured tradition. Probably one of the reasons Cann is still alive is that he never claimed himself immune and treated every bite. His hands and arms are closely lined with razor scars.

Over the years he has developed a healthy respect for snakes, but he learned it the hard way. One of his tricks was to hold a live

black snake's head in his mouth—until one bit him on the tongue. On another occasion that he shook hands with death he was found in the bush by a farmer. He had lain unconscious for four days from the bite of a tiger snake. For another fortnight he was paralysed. Today he does not mind looping a tame black snake around his neck, but such intimacy with a tiger or brown snake is definitely out. "They can't be trusted," he says.

Probably George Cann has done more to enlighten the general public on the identification of the more common snakes and the falsity of most snake yarns than any other snake-man. Each Sunday he demonstrates his snakes and answers spectator's questions. His information may be taken as scientific truth.

"I've passed the stages of 'false pretence shows,'" he says. "Why tell the public that harmless green tree snakes are 'Moonlight Tigers' or deadly mythological whipsnakes when I can show them a real tiger snake with enough venom to kill half a dozen men easily, then tell them how to avoid being bitten."

To men revolted by the mere mention of a snake it appears strange that showmen today take to snakes considering that other occupations are considerably more lucrative, and less hazardous.

But whether for doubtful profits, exhibitionism or genuine interest there will always be that character hanging around the showgrounds with a sugar-bagful of snakes.