

## The Deadly Gila Monster.

SCIENTISTS TRYING TO FIND AN  
ANTIDOTE FOR ITS POISON.

*By a Special Contributor.*

SCIENTISTS have for years been making an exhaustive study in their efforts to discover some effective remedy which will act as an antidote to the deadly poison of the gila monster, considered the most dangerous reptile to human life in the desert regions of the Southwest.

However, up to the present time there is no remedy known to science which can be used to save the life of a person so unfortunate as to receive a venomous bite from this dangerous creature.

During the past year Prof. William Wetherbee has been making a careful scientific study of the reptile, conducting his experiments in California and other parts of the Southwest, accompanied by Dr. Frank Romain, ophiologist. The latter gives the following account of their experiments:

That the gila monster is the most dangerous creature to human life in the desert regions of the Southwest, and that there is no remedy known to science which will act as an antidote to its poison, is the opinion of Prof. William Wetherbee, who for nearly a year has been making a scientific study of this reptile in the interests of experiments which for some time have been prosecuted in California.

To prove his assertion that death ensues in almost every instance where the poison of the creature enters the human system, Prof. Wetherbee gives the results of his long sojourn in the deserts of Arizona and California, where during twelve months or experiment twenty cases came under his notice, all but three of which ended fatally. In proof of his assertion that since the thinning out of the Indians the Gila monster is rapidly increasing in number, and that it is becoming a serious menace to life in those regions, he points out that more deaths have occurred from its bite during the last two years than are recorded in the previous five.

During this time five little children, four women

went personally among the Hualipis in his efforts to secure the antidote. Because of a superstitious belief that the remedy, which is also said to be efficacious in combating the fatal effects of rattlesnake poison, was a direct blessing from their gods, and should be kept secret, the Hualipis refused to disclose it. Afterwards, Shufeldt and several California physicians went personally among the Indians, but with as little success. That an antidote must be found is realized by both the medical authorities of California and Arizona. The regions infested by the "mottled terror" are rapidly becoming inhabited, and each year sees a big increase in the white population. For many years, perhaps for hundreds of them, the Pima, Apache, Maricopa and Yuma Indians, who little feared the bites of rattlesnakes or centipedes, waged a cautious and systematic war of extermination against the Gilas, but as these tribes have thinned out the "monsters" have increased alarmingly, until there are now some places where scores of them may be met with in a single day. With the increasing population of white people, the majority of whom as yet bear no especial enmity toward the Gila, it is thought that the annual death list from their bites will rapidly grow.

To prosecute his experiments Prof. Wetherbee followed the course of the Gila River, where the "monsters" have always been found in the greatest numbers. For weeks at a time he watched the reptiles in their natural homes before attempting to capture them. In his cabin near Castle Dome Mountains he at one time had fifty of them captive, and it was then that he succeeded in securing for the first time enough poison to experiment with. Irritating the creatures, he suc-

ceeded for the purpose of experimenting upon, died much more quickly.

One afternoon in August we were interrupted in our experiments by a half-Mexican ranchero, who tore up excitedly on his mustang, crying that his daughter had been bitten by a Gila. Less than an hour after the girl had been bitten we were back at her side. The victim was about twenty years old, with a bright, pretty face, and immediately complained that though she was suffering intense pain, she seemed to be paralyzed, and could move her hands and limbs only with great difficulty. A little later, after stimulants had been administered, she began crying out in agony, saying that her head was splitting. Gradually the pain seemed to leave her, and a few minutes before death, unconsciousness came to her relief. This case was a singular one, inasmuch as the girl lived for more than two hours after having been bitten. Ordinarily, few persons can speak after fifteen minutes, and with the exception of those few who recover, all cases prove fatal within half an hour.

That the whites of the Southwest are beginning to realize the terrible effects of the Gila's poison is shown in the case of a ranchman, who, while camping en route home from Phoenix, stepped on a Gila before he put on his boots in the morning. The reptile immediately buried its teeth in the ranchman's big toe and clung there. Shrieking to his companions, the ranchman called for paper, and while friends severed the Gila's head he wrote down a few last words to his loved ones at home, and gave instructions as to what should be done with his property. A few minutes later the man lost consciousness, and died with his pencil still in his hand.

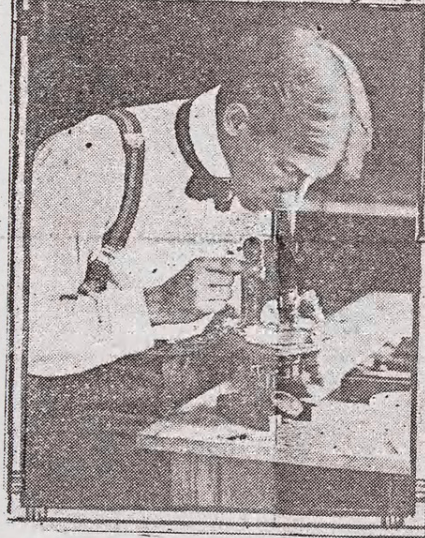
One case was called to our attention which proves that among the Hualipis exists a remedy for the Gila bite. Among the Yumas was a squaw who was bitten by one of the reptiles over thirty years ago. This woman had lived for some years among the Hualipis, and it is known that at the time she was bitten she quickly made some sort of a decoction which she drank. Years after, the army officers of that part of the Southwest were instructed to discover what this remedy was, if possible, but then it was too late. The effects of the poison had turned the squaw into a semi-idiot, until now she does not remember what she did to counteract the poison. She is now pointed out by the whites and Indians as the only person in those regions who ever survived a real bite of a Gila monster. In all of the cases where the victims survived, Prof. Wetherbee found that the bites had been slight ones, and the creatures had not caught firm enough holds to allow them to inject their venom.

For a long time there has been a great mass of fiction about the fatal effects of the breath of the Gila monster, and any number of traditions among the Indians and old soldiers of the Southwest concerning the blighting effects left by the crawling of the animal over any living plant or animal.

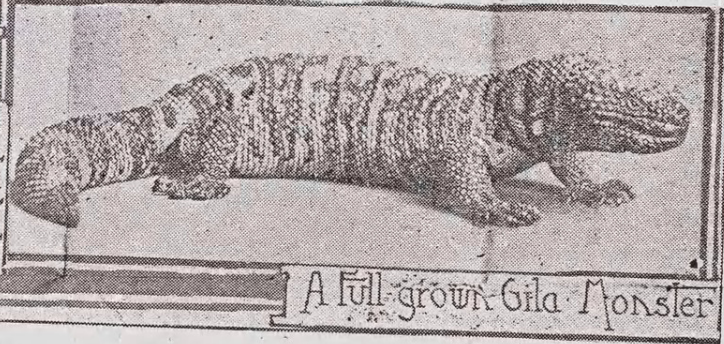




## Dr. Frank Roman Playing with Death



## Prof. Wetherbee Studying The Poison of The Gila Monster



## A Full-grown Gila Monster

seven white men and nearly twice as many half-breeds and Indians have fallen victims of the Gila's bite, and it is probable that there are other cases which have never been heard of. Several of the fatalities occurred during the sweltering summer weeks that I was with Prof. Wetherbee.

So formidable do these facts appear that President Diaz has been asked to use his influence in discovering the remedy which has long been known to exist among the Hualipis, a Mexican tribe of Indians who have always kept their antidote a secret, and have baffled the attempts of many scientists to secure it, among them the famous Dr. Shufeldt. This is not the first time that President Diaz has been interested in the matter of securing a remedy for the Gila's bite. A number of years ago the medical authorities of California asked him to secure the prescription used among the Hualipis, and it is said that not only did Diaz detail special officers to do the work, but when they failed, the President

ceeded in getting them to bite viciously at the edge of a thin plate, where the poison gradually accumulated in the form of a thick, syrupy secretion. In contrast to most serpent venoms, which are acid, the Gilas' poison was of an alkaline nature. During these experiments one of the reptiles caught a Mexican assistant by the thumb. Screaming with terror, the man beat the creature frantically against the side of the cabin, until Prof. Wetherbee secured a knife and chopped the monster in two. Every stimulant and remedy at hand were in turn employed, but the Mexican gradually fell into a stupor, and within twenty minutes was dead.

It was after this fatality that I became personally interested in Prof. Wetherbee's work, and began working in conjunction with him in his little Arizona cabin, where the accompanying photographs were taken.

For several years I had experimented with Gila monsters, but had never regarded them as more dangerous than rattlesnakes. I had had the opportunity of seeing the poison act fatally in the case of human beings, and had experimented with it on animals; but so far was I convinced that what would save a man from a rattlesnake's bite would also save him from a Gila's, that I made pets of two Arizona "monsters," and often allowed them to climb up my arms and breast, playing, as it were, with absolute death.

That I escaped death seems to me nothing short of a miracle, after knowing more of the nature of a Gila's bite. The poison obtained by Prof. Wetherbee was tried on a number of animals. A small quantity injected into one of the wild Indian dogs caused death in less than two minutes. Birds and other animals, brought

monster, and any number of traditions among the Indians and old soldiers of the Southwest concerning the blighting effects left by the crawling of the animal over any living plant or animal. Among the Cocopahs of Southern California, where I had previously spent some time, I found a belief among the Indians that the most fearful vengeance that can come to the spirit bodies of bad Indians after this life is to be bitten by a red Gila monster that roams unseen by mortal eyes over the plains, waiting to snap at the red-skinned savages inimical to the great spirit chief.

Almost as senseless as this belief is the name of the reptile itself, which it takes from the Gila River, where the soldiers of old Fort Yuma used to kill them by the hundred, and this fact naturally leads one to believe that they are only found there. As a matter of fact, they are found all over Arizona, are numerous in Southern California, and range far south into Mexico. Many settlers of the Southwest call the reptile "rattlesnake lizards," but the creature has a more hideous and startling appearance than the rattlesnake, and for that reason the soldiers probably gave it the name of "monster."

The Gila is about eighteen inches in length and in girth about the size of a boy's arm. Its tail is one-third the length of the body, and it has a mottled skin in reddish yellow and dark brown. Its mouth is similar in shape to that of an alligator, and its little black eyes have the sleepy appearance of those of the alligator family. It weighs from three to four pounds. It has four stubby legs, shaped and placed like those of a lizard, but it has none of the rapidity of that animal, and instead of being found in damp, cool spots, it frequents the hottest sands and unbaked soil. Rattlesnakes cannot remain in a heat that the Gila enjoys, and it is doubtful if even a salamander could stand a daily temperature of 135 deg. for hours, which the Gila grows fat on during midsummer weeks.

The stories which have been generally believed that Gilas will pursue human beings, and that they will crawl into houses in search of victims, have been disproved. The Gila is a stupid creature, and it will not wantonly attack. The great danger lies in stepping on



[April 10, 1904.]

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the reptiles, whose skins are much the color of desert  
sand and sun-baked earth. In these places the Gila will  
flatten itself out and go to sleep. When stepped on it  
catches viciously on to the human foot, and its teeth  
penetrate the toughest boots.

These teeth are in double rows, thick and very sharp.  
They belong to the "bulldog of reptiles," for anything  
once caught between them is held as if in a steel trap.  
The Indians have a saying that a Gila will not release  
a piece of flesh between its jaws until the big spirit  
causes a thunder, even if it takes all summer. In one  
instance, where Prof. Wetherbee allowed a Gila to bite  
an Indian dog, the reptile maintained its hold for thirty-  
six hours after the animal's death. It is known by both  
whites and Indians that it is useless to attempt to force  
a Gila to release its hold, for that only increases the  
wound, and the reptile in a rage manufactures fresh  
venom in the poison sacs which are in the roof of its  
mouth. The chief results of the Arizona experiments  
are to show that no poison antidotes now known can  
avert the fatal effects of a Gila's bite, except in instances  
where the bite is not much more than a scratch, when  
large quantities of whisky taken internally seems to be  
good. Next summer Prof. Wetherbee will go among the  
Hualpis, and will try to win by fair means or foul their  
wonderful secret.



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