

MIRACLE of FAITH

For Jeffrey Hunter, the years of loneliness are ended, the torment of wondering, "Dare I play Christ?" is over. Because he has learned that with God, all things are possible.

• There is laughter in Jeff Hunter's house now.

The first sound you hear as you walk down the long narrow path that leads around his home to the ocean is that of laughter—and then the shouts of children at play, the humming of a woman contentedly caring for her family, perhaps the noise of hammering from the shed.

You walk in the door and the house stretches out before you, the rooms white and fresh, the furniture large and modern. It is a house filled with more than sofas and chairs. It is crowded with laughter—and love. This is the home of a man who portrays the most responsible role of all time: Jesus of Nazareth in *King of Kings*. Because of his magnificent portrayal, combining a strength with a spiritual quality, he is now widely sought-after.

But only a few short years ago, he believed no one in the world was as alone as he was.

You may remember Jeff Hunter as he was then—or you may have forgotten him entirely. After all, who was he, really? Another of the good-looking youngsters swarming over Hollywood. He had a pretty wife, Barbara Rush. He made a few movies—*Call Me Mister*, *Take Care of My Little Girl*, others. His face appeared from time to time in movie magazines, usually at a house-party picture story or among a group at a swimming pool. He wasn't setting the world on fire, but he was doing all right. He was content with his work, his wife, his baby son. He liked the feel of family and friends around him.

And then, all of a sudden, he had nothing.

Calamities come in threes, they say. For Jeff Hunter they came in twos, but they were enough.

His wife told him she wanted a divorce. She went out of his life and took his son Christopher with her.

And at the same time, the phone stopped ringing, the scripts stopped coming in, the studios lost interest in him. Just like that.

How do such things happen? Do they ever really appear without warning? Nobody knows. Certainly not Jeff. Oh, there had been hints. Barbara, also struggling for a foothold in Hollywood, had accepted European location trips more eagerly than he expected, there had been coolnesses between them where there used to be warmth, quarrels conducted in whispers because Chris might hear.

But still, they were a family.

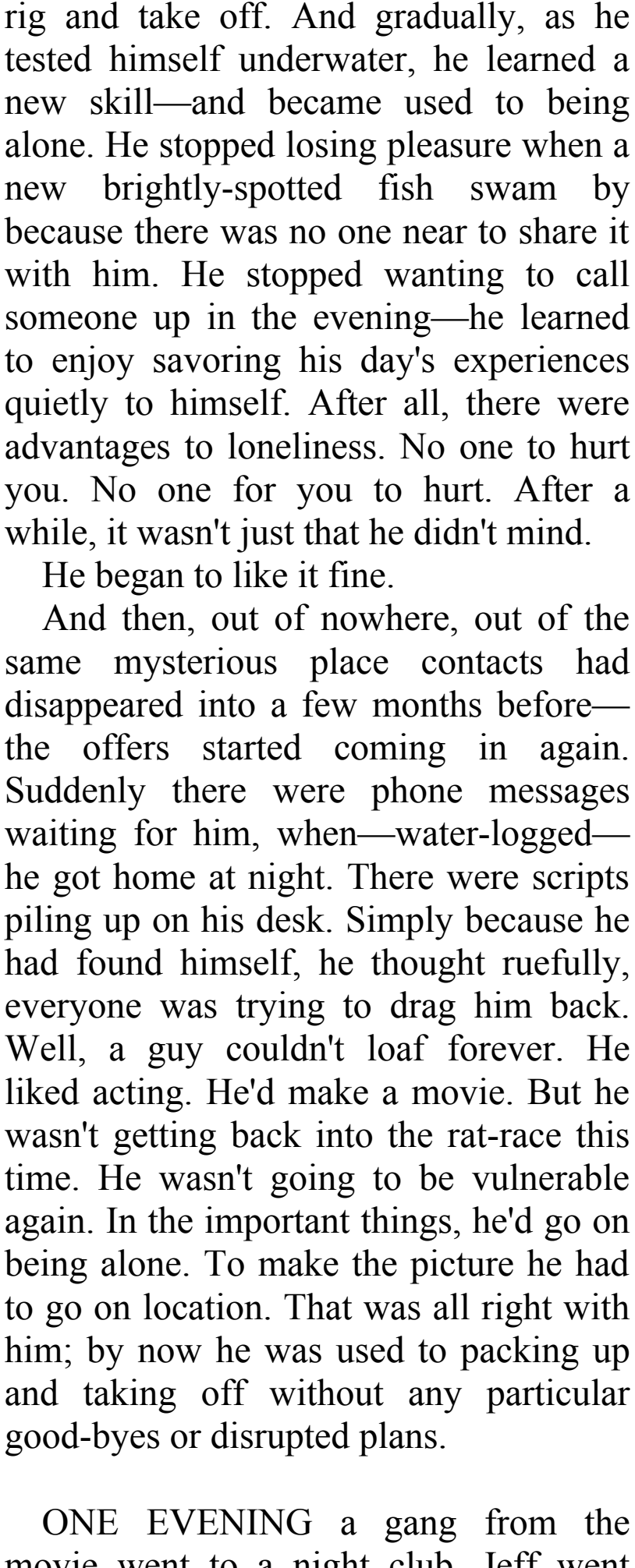
And then—they were nothing.

There had been warnings, too, about his career. But nothing you could pin down. The other bright young men around the swimming pools did seem to be pulling ahead of him a bit—but maybe next month would be Jeff's turn. A role that he thought was his—Prince Valiant—went to one of these other fellows, Bob Wagner, instead. It hurt, but it could have happened to anybody. Being Jeff Hunter, he turned down suggestions that he forget about being a friend of Bob's and fight for it. He kept his disappointment to himself.

But still, he was working.

And then—he was not.

In a way, it was not surprising that both halves of his life collapsed at once. As with so many youngsters in Hollywood, marriage and career were tied together so closely as to be almost one entity. The talk over the breakfast table was shop talk. The talk at the studio was about your wife, or your husband—also an actor. So it wasn't really unexpected—but it was devastating. As a boy in Milwaukee, Jeff had been surrounded by a warm, loving family; as a college student he had been gregarious, buddies with half the campus. As a young husband and actor, he had been part of a crowd. Now that he wasn't a husband and he hardly was acting—who was he? What was he to do?



For a while, because it was so new to him, he simply didn't believe in his loneliness. It was a joke, or a bad dream. Tomorrow he'd wake up and the phone would be ringing. There'd be an offer of a role, an invitation to a get-together. He'd be with people again. Only it doesn't always work that way. Not in Hollywood.

The only time the phone rang, it was Jeff's agent to say, "I'm sorry, pal. The part went to someone else."

So, eventually, he realized it wasn't a dream, or a joke. It was for real. He had nothing to do, and no one to do it with. What happens now?

Well, he could have gone home to Milwaukee for a lay-off. He could have quit altogether and found himself a college job, teaching acting. He could have gone out wife-hunting and ended his loneliness.

Only he didn't. Remembering it now, he says there was only one thing he wanted to do. Not fight being alone—but live with it. "All right," he told himself. "For the first time in your life, you're alone. Well, find out what it's like. Do the things people do when there's no one else around. Be alone. It won't kill you."

It didn't, either. Going through the list of things he had never done because they weren't the sort of things people he knew wanted to do, he came across skin diving. He had enough dough to buy himself a rig and take off. And gradually, as he tested himself underwater, he learned a new skill—and became used to being alone. He stopped losing pleasure when a new brightly-spotted fish swam by because there was no one near to share it with him. He stopped wanting to call someone up in the evening—he learned to enjoy savoring his day's experiences quietly to himself. After all, there were advantages to loneliness. No one to hurt you. No one for you to hurt. After a while, it wasn't just that he didn't mind.

He began to like it fine.

And then, out of nowhere, out of the same mysterious place contacts had disappeared into a few months before—the offers started coming in again. Suddenly there were phone messages waiting for him, when—water-logged—he got home at night. There were scripts piling up on his desk. Simply because he had found himself, he thought ruefully, everyone was trying to drag him back. Well, a guy couldn't loaf forever. He liked acting. He'd make a movie. But he wasn't getting back into the rat-race this time. He wasn't going to be vulnerable again. In the important things, he'd go on being alone. To make the picture he had to go on location. That was all right with him; by now he was used to packing up and taking off without any particular good-byes or disrupted plans.

ONE EVENING a gang from the movie went to a night club. Jeff went along, taking one of the half-dozen attractive girls he dated, dropping them if they seemed likely to want more than a few evenings' fun, a casual friendship. At the club they danced, laughed, had a drink, and then, across the room he saw a face. It was a pretty face, even a beautiful one—but it wasn't what he noticed. There were so many pretty girls, after all. But this one, even under the colored lights, looked as if it were in the sun. "Sort of natural," Jeff thought then, "sort of—earthy." Still looking, he grinned, wondering if that would be considered a compliment or an insult by the owner of the face. Then he shrugged. He wasn't likely to meet her.

He was wrong. The next day, she was on the set, not as a visitor but as a double for Virginia Leith, doing the difficult, dangerous riding scenes.

Jeff was more than surprised. Doubles, after all, were people who took great risks because they wanted the money that went with the danger. Was this girl broke enough to need the dough that badly?

This time, he made inquiries. Her name, he learned, was Joan Bartlett. Broke? The fellow he asked laughed. "Not exactly. She's a model—that is, she wants to be. Comes from around here, nice people—naw, she doesn't need the money. It's just that she likes to ride."

He took to watching her go through the scenes. Now he could see that she wasn't riding for pay, but because it was as natural to her as walking. She probably had as much sense of danger on a horse as she did walking down a flight of stairs. Doing some of the hardest takes, he could see that she laughed—laughed with sheer pleasure at the feel of the horse under her, the wind stirring her long, smoothed-back hair.

He decided to introduce himself.

They talked for a few minutes the first day. He learned, with a start of interest, that she had been married some years before and was now separated from her husband. She had a son, Steele, just the age of Jeff's Chris. She was glad to talk to him. She wanted to ask him some questions. Had he been able to maintain a good relationship with his boy after the divorce? Had it hurt Chris? How had he adjusted?

"We can't talk here," Jeff said, glancing around. "Why don't we go for a drive?"

To his amazement, in the moment before she answered, he felt what might have been fear—what if she says no? Out of all proportion, he sighed with relief, when she brushed a hair out of her eyes, glanced at her watch, said, "Sure. Come on."

They drove up to Mount Lemmon, and sat there in Jeff's car, for a long time, talking. Not about each other in the manner of people getting acquainted, but about the most important personal things in their lives—because they were problems they shared. Mostly they were things Jeff had been through, which Joan was still facing. When they finally drove down again, late for supper, he had another of those sudden reactions—a sinking feeling, watching her get out of his car and move back into her own life. Watch it, he told himself sternly. You want to mess your life up again? "Good luck, Joan," he called after her. She turned and smiled at him. "My friends call me Dusty," she said.

BUT HE FELT RELIEVED when the picture was over. He didn't want to get involved with anyone, much less this girl who would soon be struggling to smooth out her own life. Another movie, *The Searchers*, was waiting for him. Work was what he needed. Work and to be by himself. Not to get tangled up in emotions again. He was cut out, he decided, to live alone, to do without love, to be sufficient unto himself.

He went on to his next movie, and then to another. Just as he expected, and hoped, memory faded. He was self-sufficient. So much so that it worried his friends. "Jeff, it isn't healthy to live like this. It isn't normal. You're cutting yourself off from people—"

He laughed. "I'm fine. Don't worry."

His friends sighed, shrugged, and dropped the subject without saying what they really meant: Jeff, you're cutting yourself off from your heart.

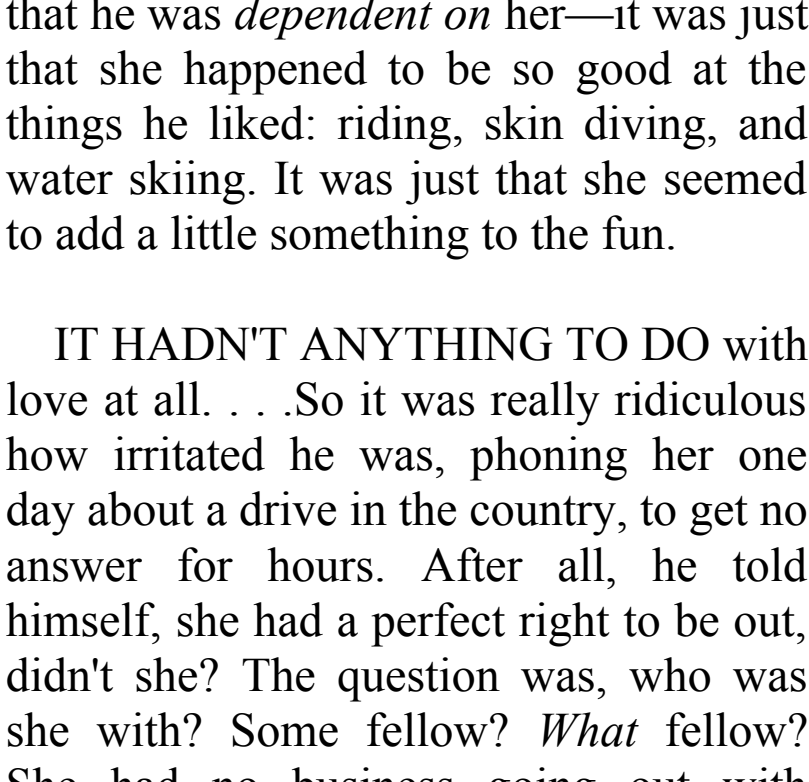
And then a letter arrived, written in a strong, open hand—a letter signed, "Dusty." Her divorce would be final, she wrote, some time within the next six months. She had been offered a job in Hollywood, modeling for Don Loper. It sounded like a good deal, but Hollywood would be new to her, new to her son, Steele. Jeff was really the only person she knew. Did he have any advice to

offer, suggestions to make? Would he write?

And, much faster than it had disappeared, memory returned.

Eventually Dusty arrived in Hollywood, with Steele in tow. Jeff saw her and was tremendously impressed with her quick adjustment to a new city, a new life. She seemed somehow to get things done; she organized her time so efficiently that he, the old-timer, couldn't keep up with her. Approvingly, he decided she was as fine a person as he remembered. And safe, too. In complete control of her own life. Able to take care of herself. The kind of girl a man could see, date, enjoy being with—without having to worry about her becoming too dependent on him, without having to hurt her. They would have a splendid friendship, without getting entangled or interfering in each other's lives.

Under the circumstances, he was able to face his first meeting with Steele with perfect equanimity. No fears, no will-he-like-me worries. Naturally, they got along fine. Jeff, used to his own boy, whom he saw constantly, was perfectly at ease. Steele knew him only as a friend of his mother's. It wasn't that Dusty deliberately kept it from him that Jeff was a movie star; it was just that she never thought about it. She had problems of her own; trivialities weren't worth thinking about.



So because it was so safe, because they were only good friends, because they were so unlikely to become "involved" they felt free to see a great deal of each other. Friends began to think of them as a pair, as Dust-and-Jeff, to invite them to the same parties automatically. It got so that Jeff, out with other people or alone, found himself looking over his shoulder for Dusty—and being startled to find she wasn't along. It wasn't, he told himself, that he was *dependent on* her—it was just that she happened to be so good at the things he liked: riding, skin diving, and water skiing. It was just that she seemed to add a little something to the fun.

IT HADN'T ANYTHING TO DO with love at all. . . . So it was really ridiculous how irritated he was, phoning her one day about a drive in the country, to get no answer for hours. After all, he told himself, she had a perfect right to be out, didn't she? The question was, who was she with? Some fellow? *What* fellow? She had no business going out with strangers in Hollywood; this wasn't a small town. Who knew what kind of a man might have inveigled her into a drive. . . . Of course, on the other hand, it might not be a stranger. It might be someone she knew very well. Dated often. Was in love with. Perfectly possible. She had a right to—

Out of his chair, Jeff leaped. What did she mean, going and falling in love with someone right under his nose? What the devil—? He strode to the phone, and dialed again. *Still* no answer. Where was she?

Hours later, Dusty answered her phone. "Hello," she said cheerfully.

The infuriated voice of Jeff Hunter stormed out at her. "Where the blazes have you been?"

There was a startled pause. Then: "Out with a friend," Dusty said. "We . . ."

"What do you mean, a friend?" Jeff bellowed. "Why do you let strangers take up your time when you haven't got enough for yourself? What—?"

Still confused, starting to get angry, Dusty held the phone an inch from her ear. "You're screaming into the phone," she started icily.

"If I want to scream, I'll scream."

"Fine," she said. And hung up.

On the other end of the phone, Jeff stood stock still. "Dusty?" he said at last. "Dusty?" There was no answer. He put the receiver down and stared thoughtfully into space. Now, just what did all that mean? Why had he gotten himself so worked up? It wasn't as though he was jealous. Or was he? Watch it, he warned himself. Watch out. . . .

So he promptly had another fight with her. This one was at a party, in full view of a hundred people. What it was about, neither really knew. But Dusty had a temper of her own, and she made use of it. Jeff had to yell louder than she did to even be heard. And what he yelled was, in simple and extremely ungentlemanly language, that if Dusty didn't like it (whatever it was) she could get out (of whatever they were in). This time it was Dusty who came to a sudden stop. Her eyes widened, her mouth closed. She considered. Then, very quietly, but with the beginnings of a smile: "I'll stay," she said.

Someone eavesdropping laughed. The fight was over. But that night Jeff Hunter lay awake for hours, thinking about it. And came to the conclusion that if she decided to go, he would doubtless have gone after her. Which meant what? He was, alas, in love.

WELL, THERE IT WAS. He hadn't wanted it. He still didn't want it, really. It put the whammy on his quiet life. But what could you do? It was too late.

The next morning, he called Dusty on the phone, and started talking. It seemed quite involved, somehow, saying what he wanted to say. But he must have given at least a slight indication. Because at some point Dusty's voice said shakily, "Don't ask me on the phone, Jeff. Come over and we'll talk about it."



And two days later, on July 7th, they were married. "It was a small wedding," Jeff said apologetically, later. "We could only round up eighty of our closest friends on such short notice."

Two weeks later, they were in Europe. Jeff was making a movie, Dusty was getting used to being a bride. Steele was busily telling everyone that he now called Uncle Jeff "Daddy" . . . wasn't that fine? On the surface, everything was fine. But, still unsure, Jeff watched and waited. Love meant trouble. Love meant pain. Sooner or later, would he wish again he'd kept his private, painless lonely life?

Three months later they were on their way home. They left Naples after a huge farewell party the night before sailing. The party was great, but the next day, as the ship steamed away from Italy, Jeff and Dusty were so groggy they neglected to read the little sign over their bathroom sink: DON'T DRINK THIS WATER. They drank plenty of it, before they noticed. By the time they arrived in Milwaukee where, for the first time, Dusty met Jeff's family, she had all the symptoms of acute hepatitis. A doctor ordered her to bed and sternly forbade her to go on to Hollywood with Jeff.

There was no help for it; Dusty went to bed in Jeff's old room, and he returned to the coast, where he was committed to another picture. There were other promises to be kept, too. He had to close his old apartment, move his things—temporarily, till they found a house—into Dusty's quarters. His son, Chris, was due for a long visit with Jeff and Dusty; he wanted to get things in shape for his boy. He had to study his script. There was so much to do—

"Darling," Dusty said on the long distance phone, during one of Jeff's nightly calls, "you sound worse than I feel."

"I'm lonely," he told her, meaning it. "It makes me feel very peculiar. Hurry home."

She did. She got over the symptoms, failed to develop the disease, and got home twenty-four hours before Jeff collapsed with the real thing: hepatitis.

It cancelled the picture, but not Chris' visit, nor Steele's high spirits, nor the necessity of somehow fitting one invalid, one wife of three months, two highly energetic small boys, two Siamese cats and one dog into a two-room apartment. It meant that Dusty became a double mother, housekeeper, and nurse, while she was still a bride. It meant preparing and serving—and hand feeding—half a dozen meals a day—and she had just gotten off a sick bed herself. Hepatitis is a nasty disease; when the patient isn't running an outrageously high fever, he's tossing up his dinner. At all times he's sensitive to noise, feeble, and likely to be irritable and depressed. If the patient is Jeff Hunter, he swings wildly from being an angel (under the impression that he's not long for this world) to being somewhat more demanding of time, comfort and affection than both boys and the complete menagerie all lumped together. If anything was ever designed to break up a marriage, it's a good-sized bout of hepatitis taking place in a crowded apartment.

There was no reason in the world why the newlywed Hunters should have pulled through it. But they did.

On the day he woke up feeling suddenly good again, Jeff Hunter looked at his wife with new eyes. Before, he had merely loved her. "Now," he said honestly, "it was more than that, I owed a great debt of gratitude."

Gratitude not only for being nurse, mother, wife, bride, housekeeper. Not only for helping him through an illness that sometimes kills, always exhausts, and if not properly cared for, leaves a man weakened for months or even years. He owed her gratitude for surviving trouble, for love that didn't fail, for proving that the heart has staying power. Love, he had thought, is a problem. Love is a danger. A man is safer alone.

HE OWED HER GRATITUDE, simply, for showing him he was wrong.

Dusty saw him through a different kind of ordeal when he was first approached to play Jesus Christ in *King of Kings*. Jeff was deeply moved by the trust Nicholas Ray, the director, placed in him by offering him the part, but at first he didn't think he could accept it. He spent sleepless nights wrestling with his conscience. "Dare I play Jesus?" he asked himself. "Will people think I'm presumptuous to portray Christ?"

Only Dusty knew what he was going through. Her confidence helped him come to a decision. Once having accepted the role, he knew he must dedicate himself completely to it, shutting out worldly activities and a public life. Shutting out, also, all thoughts of failure. It was more than a role, it was an obligation.

Dusty picked up the children—there was a new baby now, Todd—and accompanied him to location in Spain, where the picture was being filmed in a primitive, mountain area outside of Madrid. Dusty made a home in a Madrid apartment which served as a retreat for Jeff. When he came home at night he was often so emotionally involved with the role he couldn't speak for three hours.

While they were in Spain, the English press got after Jeff with hammer and tongs. They mocked the idea of a divorced Hollywood actor who'd played cowboys, daring to portray Jesus Christ. The haven of home, the serenity of Dusty, helped Jeff through two difficult years of filming when he was often under fire, when he often asked himself: "Am I worthy enough?"

The answer was given when the picture was finally released in October. It was more than a victory. It was almost a vindication.

Now there remains the fruit of his work, and the good life ahead. There remain, also, laughter and love in his home, and the sort of safety only they can bring.

There's only one thing absent from the Jeff Hunter house, in fact.

Loneliness.

No one misses it a bit.

BY BARBARA RIBAKOVE

Jeffrey stars in KING OF KINGS, MGM, and DEADLOCK, Para.