

JEFF HUNTER:

*My Wife's
Love Saved
My Life*



The Hunters' two boys, Steele and Chris, both from former marriages, get along as well as their mom and dad.



Jeff's superb performance in In Love and War is proof that his recovery is complete and his talent is more abundant than ever.

Jeff Hunter couldn't . . . he wouldn't let her know how ill he was. He barely made it home, waved his wife Dusty a jaunty "Hi!"—and then collapsed on the kitchen floor.

**by FREDDA
DUDLEY
BALLING**

JEFF HUNTER STUDIED THE white curtains at the apartment's bedroom window as they lifted idly in the late afternoon's wandering breeze. Detachedly, he studied himself as he lay—amazingly long and shallow—under the

white bedspread. That small peak so far away was, of course, his feet. He looked at his hands as they lay quietly at his sides, bleached of their normal tan. He had been tormented by a thousand demons hammering at his skull. But now he was still. His body had been twisted on a rack, but now it was without pain. He had endured the heat of a raging fire and the chill of an Arctic night. Now it was as if he were one with the air, floating in a medium as friendly as a tropic dawn. And he thought, "I understand it. I am going to die." At first the notion was without emotional content, as one will think, upon awakening, "Let me see this is Thursday." Then one thinks, "Mmm, Thursday. I must make that telephone call, order those flowers . . ." One takes up the simple ordinary task of being a living entity. So Jeff thought, "I am going to die." Then his heart vibrated abruptly as hearts will when an accident has barely been avoided, and he thought "But I don't want to die! I have too much to live for. Dusty—where's Dusty? She needs me. And Chris needs me. So does Steele, my new son, the one I acquired when I married Dusty. My wife, my two boys . . . my profession. I have a life I love. I don't intend to give it up." But it had been a narrow squeak, a fact that in the

comfort and quiet of his new sense of well-being he was able to grasp. When had it all started, this illness that had carried him so near the brink? He remembered his terrible weariness during the filming of *No Down Payment*. He recalled his inability to roll out of bed with zest in the morning, and his frightening conviction during the day's work that his characterization seemed to slip through his fingers. In a way it was understandable. His part had been deceptive: it seemed so easy whereas it was actually a top test of an actor's vitality and talent. He was playing an unpretentious, decent, sincere, right-minded citizen, and he was responsible for giving this character color and authority in competition with such colorful characters as a bombastic drunk, enacted by Tony Randall, and a psychopathic rapist, brought to dramatic life by Cameron Mitchell. That situation had been only one of his worries. Another had been the fact that the wife of one of Jeff's friends had been expiring of a lingering illness and Jeff had been standing by, night after night, loyally lending what comfort was possible, as any true friend would have done. Yet there had been intense happiness during the period, too. He and Dusty had been deeply in love, and as soon as the picture was finished, they

had been married. A month later they had flown to London where Jeff had been committed to a starring role in *Count 5 and Die*.

Altogether, it had been a perfect honeymoon. There had been a shooting schedule delay of ten days, so Jeff and Dusty had flown to Nice, and from there had vagabonded along the Riviera, investigating Cannes, Juan Les Pins, Marseilles, San Tropez, San Raphael, and Il a Vain Doux. Dusty had said, catching her breath and clinging to her husband's arm, as they gazed across the Mediterranean where it glittered beyond the trees and flowers descending the hill below their balcony, "I didn't dream that such happiness was possible." Back in London, they lived at a hotel briefly, then found a snug flat in Berkeley Mews. It was like living in a Christmas card, or retreating to the world of Dickens. It was the sort of thing to be supremely appreciated by a man of Jeff's classical learning, yet enthusiasm was difficult to summon. Fatigue and a sense of unreality persisted. There was another odd symptom: he craved candy. "Probably the difference in climate between Los Angeles and London causes the craving," he thought. "Here, one needs sweets to maintain a high blood sugar content."



At last the picture was finished so that Jeff and Dusty could fly to Naples, take the boat to Ischia, visit Rome, Pompeii, and Monticattini. There they boarded a Greek steamer, New York-bound. Ten days later, they docked in the East River. The mere details of landing and going through Customs caused them to swim in their own perspiration, Dusty suddenly having become more ill than Jeff. They gave up any idea of staying in New York to catch a few shows and visit friends, and flew directly to Milwaukee to the home of Jeff's father and mother. There Dusty was immobilized for three weeks with what was diagnosed as a virus infection. She was too ill to be moved to a hospital. Jeff was

obliged to return to California without his wife (knowing, however, that she was in the best possible hands) because he was committed to report to U-I for preparations for *If I Should Die*.

The picture was financially important to Jeff; his 20th Century contract permits him one outside picture per year, terms to be decided by Jeff and his agent. The terms for *If I Should Die* were very good. He and Dusty began to make plans for their dream house. Of added importance was the fact that Jeff was sold on the script and sold on the people with whom he was working. Yet each day seemed to find him wearier than the last.

On the first day of shooting, Jeff called Dusty at noon (she had returned only a few days earlier from Milwaukee) to ask if they had made social commitments for that evening. He couldn't seem to remember. Everything seemed to be a blur as far as the calendar was concerned. Dusty said there were no plans; hurry home as soon as possible and don't worry about a thing. Good advice—Impossible to take. Not only had memory of future plans deserted him, but the lines of his script as well. The dialogue was simple; a child could have remembered it, he told himself

angrily. Yet even as he started to speak, his tongue seemed to hang in midair, motionless in the vacuum of his mind. Jeff's makeup man said, "You're on fire. I can feel the fever radiation three feet away. Whatever you've got, you'd better take to a doctor—fast." Somehow Jeff finished the scene (with the makeup man prompting him from behind a wild wall) and somehow he drove home. He said "Hi!" to Dusty, waved a jaunty hand, and sagged against the refrigerator to avoid falling. Then he collapsed and after that he recalled almost nothing for several days.

The doctor, summoned by a frantic Dusty, said Jeff's fever was 105 degrees. Laboratory tests indicated that he had infectious hepatitis, a liver ailment from which many a man has died. Recovery depends upon many things, but two vital considerations are constitution and temperament (basic good health, and willingness to follow orders to the letter.) Even so, convalescence takes time—often as long as two years. It was at that point in Jeff's reminiscence that Dusty entered the bedroom in which her husband had knowingly taken up his life again a few moments before. "So, you're awake!" she said. "And your eyes look like you instead of burnt holes in a blanket."

He took her hand and brought it to his cheek. "Do I remember right, when I think that the picture, *If I Should Die*, had to be recast and reshot?"

"So what?" grinned Dusty. "It was only money."

Jeff said unsteadily, "I thought, last year at this time, that we'd be moving into our own home by now. I wanted a real home for you; not just an apartment."

"I *like* this apartment," Dusty said emphatically. "*Really*. It's sunny, convenient, and easy to keep. We couldn't ask for anything better right now."

Jeff studied his wife's face. Her frank eyes and candid smile were reassuring. "But if we have both boys, yours and mine, while Barbara is making a picture in India, it's going to be crowded."

Dusty chuckled. "Jeff, if we had a twenty-room house with two six-year-olds in it, it would still seem crowded. As it is we have two bedrooms—one for them, one for us, and an efficiently functioning TV set. That's all we need, really."

That ended the discussion for that day. Jeff followed the doctor's orders to the letter. He watched his diet, he spared his strength. And sometimes he worried because of the monotony of their lives. "You should get out for a change of scene," he told Dusty. "We

haven't yet been married a year and we're living the lives of octogenarians."

"I like to be with you," Dusty said. "That's why I married you — remember?"

Together they made a study of television. Day after day they turned the set on as soon as they awakened in the morning and turned it off with the lights at night. Jeff studied staging techniques, camera angles, script development. He filled notebooks with ideas and critical comment. Sometimes, after he and Dusty had wound the clock and opened the windows, they fell into discussions of the past day's programs that carried them to the first light of dawn.

Dusty's comments proved to be fresh and — more important to Jeff — non-professional. Never having been an actress, Dusty brought to her viewing the attitude of a typical member of a television audience.

They read books—all the best sellers both had missed in recent years, and many of the classics that had been overlooked because of the pressure of day by day living in the present. They conducted unceasing health research. Whenever they heard of someone who had recovered fully from infectious hepatitis, they made contact and dis-

cussed cures. They read dozens of books on diet, finding one in particular that proved to be straightforward and genuinely helpful: Adele Davis's "Let's Eat Right To Keep Fit." They talked to Gaylord Hauser, world-renowned nutritionist, a long-time friend. They discovered cabbage juice to be a wonderfully effective natural food, and one employed quickly and gratefully by the liver. (Jeff says nowadays, "Before our friends accept an invitation to dinner at our house, they ask what's on the menu. We aren't like that, though. We think everyone has to work out his own health diet.") But most of all, Jeff and Dusty fell more deeply in love than ever in getting to know one another not only as sweethearts, but as questing human beings. They discussed marriage—the institution, not only their own relationship—each having married young and having endured divorce, and each having been closely associated with other separated couples. They agreed that many a young couple never really know each other. They fall in love in the midst of the constant round of activities that are a part of today's accepted social pattern; they are married in a white satin ceremony which is a poignant pageant to guests but is usually a medley of confusion to the members of the wedding;

they fly to some glamour spot for a brief honeymoon; they return to the problems of establishing a home and, frequently in these days, two careers. Along come children who are little sponges and blithely absorb the strength, time and attention of parents for at least twenty years. To all appearances, such a couple have contributed to normal statistics: they have established a successful family unit in the community. Yet, under pressure, it often becomes apparent that the two persons most concerned with the marriage are little more than strangers with children. However, at the end of their first year of married life, Jeff and Dusty knew one another better than many couples (particularly those in the film industry) know one another on their silver wedding anniversary—if one takes place. So successful was Jeff's routine of rest, study, and companionship with Dusty that, at the end of nine months, he had accomplished a recovery as complete as that normally requiring two years.

Early in the spring Jeff was borrowed for a top part in John Ford's production of *The Last Hurrah*. Because it was to be a strenuous picture, Jeff tried out his stamina and further conditioned himself by skiing in Aspen, Colorado, at an altitude of almost

twelve thousand feet. He suffered no ill affects.

In June, Jeff went to work for 20th Century-Fox in *In Love And War*.

One noon a fellow actor joined Jeff at a Fox commissary table, and in sincere sympathy expressed his regret over Jeff's misfortune.

Jeff shook his head, smiling comfortably, and said, "That's great of you to say, but actually I'm not entitled to sympathy. What happened to me has proved to be a great break. The things I learned during those months of sickness and enforced inactivity have started to pay off a thousand percent. The fact is that I'll be collecting big, fat dividends from the experience for the rest of my life." Sometimes very strange packages are heaven-sent. •