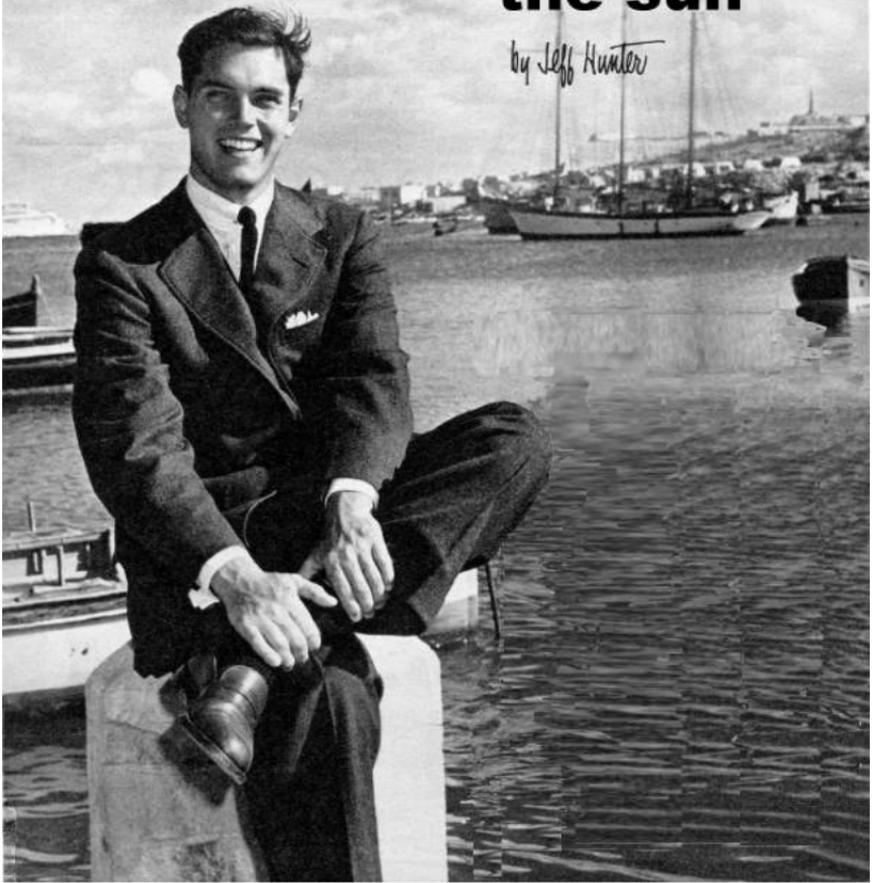


HOW THE STARS FOUND FAITH

TWICE, HIS FAITH HAS SAVED JEFF'S LIFE. ALWAYS, IT HAS TAUGHT HIM HOW TO LIVE.

towards the sun

by Jeff Hunter



- Two years ago, on a sunny afternoon, off the Isle of Gozo near Malta in the Mediterranean, I did a darn fool thing. I went skin-diving alone. The studio had chosen this part of the south of Europe to film *A Sailor Of The King* and I had been given a few days off by the director of the picture.

With flippers on my feet I went sightseeing along the shore. I was wearing goggles through which I could peer deep beneath the surface of the water at the marine growths and rock formations.

I was swimming along like this an hour later, miles from anyone, when I saw an undersea cave just below me. Getting curious I kicked my way down to it and wriggled into the opening. Ahead in the dimly-lit water were odd shapes, like statues in a grotto, that were hard to make out, so I kept working my way closer. I was far inside when I began to feel uncomfortable and decided I had better go up for air. Then I realized that the roof of the cave had been sloping down all the time and I was deeper than I ordinarily dive. It might take me longer than I thought to get my breath—too long, maybe!

Don't let anyone tell you that a man can't sweat under water. I was panicky getting out of there. My clearest memory is of that split second when I turned around to swim out of the cave. Around and behind me was murk and deep shadow. Ahead, through the opening, was sunlight streaming down from above — streaming down like the light that used to fall on the altar of the church where I served as an acolyte.

I don't know how I reached the surface again. As I floated there and slowly regained my composure I knew again that for me there could never be any doubt. The difference between being in the church and out of it was like the difference between being in the sunshine

which now warmed me and being in that cave— that cold cavern—below.

I have friends who don't look to God, or to any spiritual force for that matter, and it is to them that I wish I could present this picture of faith. Because He and His meaning are so necessary to me as to be an inalienable part of my existence.

I did not need to be frightened in a far-off ocean to learn this—only to realize it again. It has come to me at times when there was no fear; just the opposite, in fact. Only a few winters ago I was skiing at Winter Park, Colorado, all alone on the great white expanse of the mountainside, when a feeling of indescribable exhilaration overcame me. I was alone and yet I had a positive sensation that I had never in my life before been so close to Someone. These things are too personal to be explained, I know. Yet from the attempts others have made to explain them to me I know that they happen to all of us. We are all equally favored—if we but care to respond.

Maybe I am fortunate in that I had a warm and satisfying relationship with my faith, the Episcopalian, right from the start. There are times in the lives of all small boys when any church service is too long to sit through. That time was over quickly for me, perhaps, because of

a rather dramatic episode in my childhood.

I was only five years old when I suffered a severe attack of appendicitis. Surgery was followed by peritonitis and then nephritis. I can remember lying on my hospital cot, quite conscious although I was in a state of crisis.

A nurse had come to the bed and was leaning over me when she asked, "How long has he been like this?"

There was a reply, some hurried movements and then the beginning of emergency treatment that seemed to involve everything from slapping my face and administering injections, to piling me into warm blankets and even surrounding me with infra-red lamps. I had gone into a stage preliminary to a death coma.

But while I was aware of the fact that the doctors and the nurses were fighting for my life with all the medical skill at their command, I knew also that my parents had been summoned, and our priest, and that they were praying for me. What came through to me then as the telling force, the most powerful force, were their prayers. This impression I cannot forget. It may well have been behind my decision, later on, when I was in high school, to become an acolyte at our church—Christ's Episcopal of Whitefish Bay in Milwaukee.

I was studying music at this time and one of my favorite ways of spending a weekday afternoon was to enter the church quietly when no one was about and softly play the electric organ. I'm not telling about this as an illustration of my piety. I have an idea that it was my secret desire to be a performer that was being satisfied here. Even so, I like to know that I got the satisfaction from my church.

Our church was not a large one and ordinarily no one ever entered it during a weekday afternoon, so my musical sessions were rarely interrupted. But one day, as I was playing, a man and woman came in and sat down quietly as if to pray. I didn't know what to do and finally left the organ and approached them.

"Would you rather I didn't play?" I asked.

They looked at me in surprise. "Of course not," said the woman. "Please go on," the man told me.

From their manner I knew they had accepted my music as a part of the atmosphere of the church, like its vaulted ceiling and stained glass windows. I felt that perhaps I should be a part of it.

Ever since, music has appealed to me as an important and impressive part of any service, and perhaps the most impressive part of it is the way it internationalizes man. On my trip abroad

I visited churches whose pastors I could not understand because of difference in language—or even difference in dialect when my own language was spoken. But all of the difference was wiped out and it was like being back in my own church when the organist sat down and the melody and surge of an inspiring hymn rolled out. When I went to Westminster Abbey in London, where of course I understood the sermon, I still felt like a tourist until the music started. At that moment I became a worshiper.

ONE tends to think of faith as a phenomenon stemming only from the church. Personally I have never believed that a man must be in front of the altar or even technically within the church to be assured of sanctification. I really feel that God can be found anywhere and by any name. A man seeking God can find Him if he doesn't worry so much about *where* to find Him as *how*. The great truths about Him, it seems to me, are not confined to any special place.

But for most people I do think that membership in a definite denomination and attendance at formal services are the most rewarding of spiritual relationships. The rituals involved, so often criticized as only pageantry, are important because they symbolize man's hunger for salvation. They help create an emotional

appeal and I can see nothing wrong in this. The most human thing about people is emotion. A church whose spire points to the sky, whose altar glows with warm radiance, whose priest stirs the heart as well as the intellect with his message, is in my opinion playing its proper inspirational role in the lives of its membership.

I remember visiting the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago one Sunday. As I entered the church I noticed that many of the men walking in with me were derelicts of the most dejected type. They were so badly dressed they looked like so many tramps. But most depressing was the lost look on their faces, eyes staring out at a world which had no meaning for them.

Not three quarters of an hour later I had witnessed a virtual transfiguration of all these men. They had heard in the ensuing time a message of inspiration from a man as old as any of them, but with a heart that overflowed with the happiness he had found in his calling as a minister. And he made it plain that this was the *only* difference between him and the other men; he had no more worldly goods, no better health, probably. Having narrowed down this difference he proceeded to eliminate it altogether by calling for volunteers to join him as Christians.

They began to stand up and their faces shone with hope. You forgot how they were dressed outwardly in the wonder of how they had changed inwardly. This happened in a church. Men had entered with hunger in their stomachs but it had been proved that their souls and hearts were even hungrier. This could happen only in a church.

As I have mentioned before, the mood of devotion and closeness to my faith comes as often to me on a lonely mountain as it does when I am sitting in my pew. Nevertheless, I am a church member. In Hollywood I attend the Episcopalian Church of St. Mary of the Angels. The reason for my regular attendance is that I go not only to worship but to re-orient myself to the world in which I live.

Within the atmosphere of my church I am struck by realizations about myself that would not come to me otherwise. I can review my attitudes and actions with a clarity which I attain, I think, because I am released from the ordinary tensions of the day at such a time. It is possible, for instance, to harbor an intolerant view of someone or to have offended a friend without knowing that one has been guilty of a serious social breach. Then one takes time out to meditate quietly and the truth dawns.

My faith is a direct source of strength to me, of course. The first screen test I made for a Hollywood studio was not a good one and I earned a negative report. I pretended it didn't matter but fooled no one—certainly not myself. The future of my acting career looked black and my heart felt like someone had hung weights on it. The feeling persisted until I decided one afternoon to go to church.

There was no service, no other person; just me brooding in my seat. As always, I felt the flow of His spirit and against it my negative thinking could not persist. When I left I knew that nothing had happened that wasn't for the best. Not long afterward my earlier test came to the attention of 20th Century-Fox, my present studio, and this time I won out. But even if this had not come about, my heart and my courage would not have failed me again.

As a young husband and a new father I am not too crazy about all the traveling an actor has to do; it seems I am always being separated from those I love and sent into lonely exile. I was only two days married when I had to leave my wife and go on location in Norfolk, Virginia. This was four years ago, during the filming of *Princess Of The Nile* in which I worked with Debra Paget and Michael Rennie and it was at Christmas time, too.

I can see myself now, wandering through the streets of Norfolk alone, not knowing what to do. And then one day I got an idea and entered the old Saint Paul's Episcopal Church where I met the Rev. Moultrie Guerry. We had a long talk, he sensed my loneliness and took me home with him to dinner. I met Mrs. Guerry, his twenty-year-old son, Moultrie, Jr., and his daughter, Sally. In the warmth of this family gathering I felt almost as if I were at home with my own folks and my wife.

Two years later I was again pulled away from those I loved by my work—and again at the worst possible time. This time I had been a father for only a week when I had to leave on that trip to Malta I spoke about before. The birth of our son, Christopher, made us a nice little family of three but I soon broke this up by going to Europe and staying there for four months. What peace of mind I had when I took off I had obtained from my prayers for the welfare of Barbara and Kit. The fact that I could continue to pray for them while I was away, in full confidence that my prayers were being heard, was my remaining and only consolation.

I'm afraid, as I read what I have written up to now, that I have sounded like a preacher myself. Well, there could be reason for this since I once planned to enter the ministry.

When World War II ended I was a high school senior and still an acolyte. One Sunday a young visiting priest officiated at our services in church. I assisted him at the altar and he thanked me afterward. "It's nice to have an acolyte help you," he said. "The last service I conducted I conducted alone. It was The Service of the Dead at Iwo Jima."

The war was still fresh in my mind. I had even contemplated enlisting as soon as I had graduated. With his words I suddenly got a new conception of priesthood—the romance of it as well as the spiritual dedication of it.

After I left school, however, I knew my talents better and thought I might make an actor. But, as you can see, the preaching urge has not died out entirely!

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